

The Power of Prayer

&

Ten World Religions

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Dedication

I dedicate this book to all women for they are the most loving of all God's creations.

Throughout history, men have discriminated against, exploited, and misused women, as most religions of the world deemed this their so-called birthright. I, however, recognize women for their intrinsic virtues of humility, compassion, faith, forgiveness, and patience.

I am thankful to the following women of my family who have provided inspiration in every step of my life by showing me the greatness of these virtues. In every one of them, I have found the Godly attribute of motherly love which men do not inherently possess. I am therefore not making a distinction as to which one of these women is related to me in that way:

Ishwar Kaur Sabharwal, Nand Kaur Anand, Jasbir Kaur Anand, Satnam Kaur Sabharwal, Punit Kaur Juneja, and Jasbir Kaur Sabharwal.

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I am also thankful to Russ Shulkes. It would have been very difficult for me to present my book in this form without his active, sincere and intellectual help. His educational background in different religions was a great asset in reviewing this book.

Preface

If I'm asked to name a single factor that has transformed my life, from an average to an ardent believer in the power of Almighty God, then that would be my enhanced faith in prayer and its effects, to the extent that nothing at all seems 'impossible' to accomplish, provided I keep at bay any selfish motivations.

Prayers of all world-religions are unanimous in realizing and recognizing the existence of the Supreme Power, the Almighty, though His/Her Names may differ for each.

The 'routes', followed by the different religions, towards the final destination of attainment of Communion with God (beatitude, emancipation, liberation, salvation) may vary, and His Names may differ, yet the Only Creator remains to be One.

It is immensely ironic, then that humanity is embroiled in rift and conflict over trivia; hatred and violence rule the roost; wars have claimed millions of lives. All this despite the fact that there are major commonalities, and negligible differences, but it is unfortunate that vested interests in all religions have preferred to lay stress on divisions rather than compromise.

I've made a humble attempt without prejudice towards any religion, hoping that adherents of all faiths shall move towards a spirit of reconciliation and camaraderie. And with this faith in my heart I pray ardently that this would result in peace and harmony for all.

Dr. Harsimran Singh

Foreword

The Power of Prayer is truly a hidden treasure. It combines concept, content, and implementation in superior fashion; excellence which moves beyond inspiration to instruction.

Discourse on prayer may well be the most ancient of literary genres, following naturally as it would as the second order of writing after sacred texts.

Daring to write in the line of this literary tradition requires both courage and humility. To stand tall in this art however, requires blessing.

I undertook to prepare this preface out of fondness, and personal admiration and respect for the author. I was confident before starting to find passable and solid reflection. I did *not* however, expect to find what awaits readers on the pages to follow. In them Dr. Singh draws near to the mystical, at times the ineffable. He places before the reader in clear and systematic discourse a handbook for spiritual growth which asks for a place among the classics.

The title, *The Power of Prayer and the Ten World Religions* turns out to be somewhat literal. The book has two distinct parts, the first being a sensitive inquiry into the power of prayer. The second looks at ten great religions via the ingress and function of prayer in each respective tradition. He introduces not only the express teaching on prayer from each tradition as found in the sacred texts, but further (and magnificently) includes actual prayers from the founders and saints of the tradition. Through this doorway each tradition is respectfully presented in its important aspects such as theology, rituals, festivals, role of the family, and so forth. This alone would make for a worthy text book and reference book. More importantly it furthermore encourages a mind and heart for interfaith, and respect and awe for the Divine in each great religion.

As helpful and informative as this comparative religion section of the book might be, the real surprise lies in the first half of the book; 5 sections including “the Basics of Prayer,” “the Methodology,” “Why We Pray,” “the Pillars of Prayer,” and “Benefits Accruing from Prayer.” These sections are further subdivided into such topics as “forgiveness,” “triumph

over addiction and vices,” “compassion and mercy,” “spiritual elevation,” and so forth.

It is in this first part of the book where my self-appointed task changed course. I initially thought of myself as the benefactor, supporting a worthy writer with a worthy project. This chimera dissolved, and I found myself reading to learn, reading to grow, and reading to see light on the only path which really matters. Each line, each paragraph, each page is a lighthouse over dark seas of personal and social struggles. A light pointing to the destination of joyful, fulfilled, and eternal life with God.

Enjoy this book. I have three pieces of advice for the reader: 1. Read on, 2. Read slowly, and, 3. When done, keep the book out, and near at hand.

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Section I: The Meaning of Prayer

*Follow the Basics
and
Arrive at the Destination*

Why We Pray

Prayer is a need within us as we search for answers and a spiritual force to guide us. We rejoice in praying with that discovery that we are not alone, that God is with us and guiding us. He is our advisor, leader, creator, and counselor. He is always with us, lighting our way.

Prayer is our silent, personal communication with the Lord. It is an inward, private meditation. We know he is watching over us, providing comfort and solace. With God in our lives we feel the courage to try new things, to reach for new goals, to achieve and better ourselves and humanity. God is our beacon of hope that lets us know all is possible and there are no limits to the good we can do and the things we can achieve.

We reach out to God through prayer. Through prayer we can communicate our deepest gratitude for giving us life and all the miracles it holds. We share our fears, desires, sins, and good deeds. Prayer is an essential part of our being. It saturates our mind and fills our soul. It fulfills all our physical, emotional, and psychological needs. With prayer, anything is possible, and our highest ambitions and aspirations can be accomplished.

With prayer we search for answers to our deepest and most difficult questions. We try to make sense of our existence and find purpose in our life. We seek answers to the secrets of life and the vastness of the universe.

With prayer, we express our heartfelt yearnings, our fondest hopes, and deepest desires. When one is secure, happy and trouble free, prayer helps in renewing one's faith in God, thereby keeping problems at bay. God never sleeps; He is eternally awake to our needs and aspirations, both material and spiritual.

We pray to God to cleanse our soul, ask for forgiveness, repent for all our sins, and search for a purer path to goodness. We share our frustrations, fears, and miseries, and hope that our weaknesses can be turned to strengths and that our past sins can reform us and provide a path to higher achievement.

During times of upheaval, prayer becomes a source of strength to face the onslaught of problems with fortitude. It rejuvenates the feeling within us that we are not alone; that God is always residing within our body-temple; that He doesn't have to be searched for anywhere outside.

We pray for answers to the unknown, for the keys to life's many mysteries.

We pray for ourselves, our family, our friends, our country, and our world.

We pray for small things that affect only us, and the global desires that affect us all.

Through our prayers, we know that God hears us and is looking over us, caring for the good of humanity. Prayer is an instrument that teaches us to trust God; to have utmost, unwavering faith in Him, in His decisions and plans for us. Whatever He does has a reason. It has a cause and an effect, a definitive one at that.

Only He knows what is good for us, in what measure, at what time and by what means. His coded limits cannot be deciphered by the human intellect.

How much we give of ourselves to prayer is up to each of us. We must free ourselves of all but our focus on the Lord. Give ourselves fully, and with an effort our prayers will be heard and wonders shall be achieved.

The Significance of Prayer

Prayer is essential to the growth of our bodies, minds, and souls. We are all seedlings that grow and blossom with prayer. We reach up unto the Lord and bask in his warm love. We gain strength in his powerful aura. Not a day should pass without getting in touch with God and saying a prayer.

It is important to set aside time each morning and evening to pray to God. Try to find a peaceful place, a sanctuary that is quiet and soothing. Focus fully on the Lord and all his power and greatness. You must free your mind of distractions and trivial thoughts. When you pray, you must put all other thoughts aside and fully dedicate your entire being to God.

Read, hear, and reflect on the word of God. Be sincere and give the Lord your full attention. There is no point in merely reciting prayer by rote. Let the Lord and all thoughts of him saturate your soul.

Every morning when you rise, thank Him for the dawning of the day. Pray for guidance and the strength to make it through the day. In the evening, reflect on your actions and deeds. Did you cause harm to someone? Repent and pray for forgiveness. Did you go out of your way to help someone? God will be pleased. Did someone cause you harm? Forgive him from the bottom of your heart and pray that God will forgive him and show him the path to goodness. Did someone help you? Pray for that person, thank him, and thank the Lord for that person.

God's Will

God wills and creates everything. He is the Creator, Enforcer, and Ruler. He is the guiding force behind every occurrence. Those who trust and recognize God as the Almighty shall be rewarded and receive the fruits of their destiny.

God appreciates those who have faith in Him and blesses them with good fortune.

Those who obey His will are the recipient of His gracious vision. We are all God's children, we belong to Him. Those who love the Lord and accept His will shall find peace and joy. Their devotional worship in the Almighty is the sweet nectar that nourishes their soul.

We must all bear our naked souls to God through prayer and meditation. Thank the Lord for all He has given, for only He holds the power to give and take; life and death are under His will. We must always praise the giver of peace, forever chanting and savoring the Lord's Name.

Revere God's will. Devote time each day to prayer and meditation. Thank Him, cherish Him forever, begging for the treasure of His Name.

Finding Comfort in Prayer

We are all God's children, and through prayer we know God cares for each and every one of us. Sometimes we may feel lost and depressed and lose our way. Tragedy may strike and we question whether God cares for us. God is always there with us and God is always caring for us. In these dark times, prayer is the guiding light that will help us find the Lord. It comforts us and hugs our soul.

Prayer is a potent force that shines light when all seems dark and full of despair. It provides a lifting arm to reach out to us in times of tragedy, depression, and heartache. It is a bright ray of hope when all seems bleak, and it offers a path to find comfort and peace.

God always cares for us. He never abandons us. He is a part of our life from birth to death and at every milestone in between.

We must never give up our faith in God. God offers hope and comfort. Yet at times when we need him most—in our deepest depressions and through our worst misfortunes—our faith and ability to pray sincerely may waiver. God understands our weaknesses. When we are too weak to pray, drained of all hope, he is still with us. God will not abandon us. He provides new hope and energy, rejuvenating us at our lowest points, and helping us back on our path to salvation.

God is always there waiting for us. Through prayer, our misery can be replaced by fortune and prosperity. When we find our way, we find all the glory and good that comes with prayer.

Journey through Prayer

Just as life is winding path of obstacles and milestones, so too is our journey through prayer. From our first realization of the power of prayer to the final succumbing to a complete Communion with God, prayer takes us on a magical voyage of discovery and joy.

This is not an easy journey. We must enter into this journey with a clear mind and be prepared with a solid plan. We must welcome the Lord fully and allow that He will chart out our path. He will provide guidance at every turn and we will feel his presence throughout our journey.

We must always face the Lord with full trust and faith. There should be no wavering in devotion. We must not allow fear, doubt, or complacency to find a way in if we are to succeed in our effort to arrive in the land of our Lord and Master, the Creator. As we rise through the milestones of prayer, He shall always be there as a welcoming force and a guiding light.

In order to set out on our journey to full Communion with God, we must be ready both mentally and physically. Just as one would not set out on an important trip without preparing and packing the necessary resources, we must be prepared for our journey through prayer.

This journey through the stages of prayer propels us forward in our spiritual advancement. As we rise through the stages, we aspire to become one with God.

Milestones of Prayer

As we grow as a person, so too does our prayer and our relationship with God. The stages of prayer can be broken down into six milestones. As we grow closer to God and to complete Communion with the Lord, our relationship and communication with God develop and mature with us.

The first stage of prayer is to ask for the most common desires and requirements—our health, happiness, success, and wealth. This is the stage where most people pray and most prayer falls under this category. We ask for the promotion we hope to get at work, to win the lottery, afford a new home; we pray for the health of our friends and family, for those that are sick to heal and those that are healthy to remain so; we pray to find a partner to love, for children, and grandchildren. We pray for our immediate needs and those that will help us and those around us.

As we progressively ascend to the second stage, we move on from our most basic and everyday desires. We seek, through prayer, a transformation, a spiritual elevation that will bring us closer to God and all His glory and goodness. We seek nourishment for our soul, to find out the purpose of our existence. We realize material gains are transitory and perishable. The mind is guided towards permanent and stable joy. .

In the third stage of prayer, we feel rejuvenation. We successfully passed through the second stage and have reawakened our soul. In the third stage, we appreciate all life has to offer and humanity appears united and at peace. The mind becomes pure and stable, the soul is cleansed. Here we are easily engrossed in prayer and contemplation. We feel a renewed vigor and encouragement accompanied by the experience of an overflowing energy.

We have transcended the barriers of our earthly existence and are nearer to the heavenly realms of God as we arrive at stage four. Our mind is rarely led astray by trivial thoughts and futile desires. Our focus is pure and whole. Our mind has become sculpted and conditioned to God's ways, we are closer to being completely sublime and pristine.

As we enter the fifth stage, we come to the realization that the living God is the only wise and intelligent entity. God is the only power and authority, exercising control over all matters. This Power is the protector and preserver of the entire universe. He is the friend, relative, guide and advisor, at all times and under all circumstances. We understand that our own life, our plans and schemes, our intellect and power, are all miniscule—that these do not serve any purpose other than laying impediments in what God wants to accomplish through the aspirant.

Finally, and the apex of our journey, we arrive at the sixth and final stage—Communion with God. We are in a joyous state; we reach bliss as we meet the beloved. The Supreme Power is always ready to fulfill the demands of the devotee. The soul-bride is welcomed by a loving, caring husband awaiting her. This is emancipation.

The Spiritual Ascension

As we progress on the road to spiritual ascent, our minds make new discoveries, unraveling the magical mysteries of life and the world around us. Each new revelation is part of a long chain of revelations, linking the present to the past and the future.

Every event that occurs is part of a much larger picture being created by the Lord. He knows the purpose and imbibes meaning in everything.

Visionaries reach this stage and find new creative and heights and intellectual feats. They dare to be bold enough to predict the greatness lying ahead, are not deterred by challenges and the seemingly adverse and hostile circumstances. Instead of living life bogged down by pitfalls and unexpected obstacles, they rise up to the occasion and face it head on.

Ascending to His glory, we learn the secrets and the essence of life. Once the purpose is realized, we must strive to identify the tools and implements, the equipment and the instruments that we must deploy for achieving the high objectives.

Life will be filled with joy and optimism and our positive spirit will spread to all those we come into contact with.

Spiritual Elevation

Prayer gives peace of mind and inward serenity, which results in an elevation of the spirit. Man's soul grows immensely and reaches a pinnacle of glory where it is in direct communion with the Lord.

Faith in the existence of God, and love for God, are essential prerequisites of such an elevated state of consciousness. When we are spiritually elevated, feelings of fear, isolation, and inferiority are vanquished. Our happiness and joy know no boundaries.

In this state, everything seems welcoming and comforting. There is a set plan where nothing is wasted, nothing falls apart, nobody suffers, no one is exploited, and each is cast in the mold of God.

To experience such bliss, one must enter the domain of God-consciousness. To know this, to feel this in one's heart and soul, is to arrive at the destination that all of us long to be: communion with the Creator.

We see the world in a whole new light. We begin to understand that all the things that we thought were the cause of anxiety were being perceived wrongly by us. Now, viewed in the proper perspective and context, they do not seem to be hostile at all. They are, instead, useful and an immensely significant part of the scheme of things, embodying the Divine, as we ourselves embody the Divine.

Our fears are seen as extensions of our own persona, and there is no justification in fearing a part of one's own self. We feel united with our former fears and welcome what was once threatening for we are no longer afraid.

Those who never attain spiritual elevation awake in the morning with a troubled heart, full of unnamed fears and vague anxieties on our minds, relating to barely remembered dreams. It lies heavy on our hearts, so that we have difficulty stirring ourselves from a desolate lethargy. We look deep into the eyes and faces of our loved ones only to find that we are unable to help them.

Section II: How We Pray

*Let These Techniques be the Guidelines
for Success to be Assured*

Individual Prayer

Read, hear, and reflect on the word of God. Be sincere and give the Lord your full attention. There is no point in merely reciting prayer by rote. Let the Lord and all thoughts of him saturate your soul.

Individual prayer can be said anywhere, in your bed or at a house of worship. Prayer should be said slowly and deliberately. Do not rush. Find the full meaning in each word and thought. Truly feel each word and mean it with every ounce of your soul. A prayer said with sincerity and attentiveness will be heard by the Lord and please him.

A prayer can be spoken aloud or recited silently. Some may find it helpful to use a rosary or hold a Holy Bible. You can kneel down on the floor, sit on a bed, or stand. You can be walking or riding on a train, sitting in an office, at your home, or in a house of worship. You can be dressed in your best or in your night clothes ready for bed. What matters most is your state of mind and how fully you devote your self to the prayer and the Lord.

Most important are your thoughts and intentions: the direction, focal point and intensity of those thoughts. Prayers made for the betterment of others are selfless prayers, and so are heard more quickly than the petitions sent out for oneself.

Whether silent or spoken, a prayer must be performed with utmost faith and diligence; otherwise it is futile to go through the exercise.

Through prayer, we move decisively towards the desired goal: Communion with God.

Congregational Prayer

While individual prayer is important, more powerful is the congregational prayer. Together voices rise and sing as one, and God hears this jubilant praise loud and clear. Congregational prayer is a powerful force, a quick and effective means of reaching out to the Lord and being heard.

What makes congregational prayer so powerful? There are so many voices of different people, each with their own strengths and varying degrees of faith. The more pious souls pray selflessly and come to the aid of those whose faith may temporarily waiver or weaken.

A single individual does not have all of the attributes essential for a prayer to be accepted and answered. A congregation, taken as one, contains all the ingredients of sincere prayer: humility, purity, love, selflessness, hope, faith, honesty, and goodness. Focused together on prayer, individuals forget their ego, lust, anger, and greed and can come together as one voice focused on the Lord and all His magnificence and glory.

Together in Holy Congregation, we express our gratitude to the Creator, through the word, as enshrined in the Scriptures, preaching harmony, peace, tolerance and understanding between the followers of all faiths. All humanity is God's creation and all are equal. We pray for each other and for the general welfare of all humanity. We pray selflessly for all those who pray with us, and those who are unable to pray.

When we pray selflessly, God rewards us with fortitude and courage. God likes this, so He showers His benediction upon us, for selflessness is one of the great attributes we must embrace and cherish.

Persistent Prayer

We must pray everyday, several times a day, with purpose and ardent fervor. We must never overlook the importance of persistent prayer. In communicating with God, we must be stringent in our routine and never take Him for granted. We must constantly pray to His Beloved and all He has done for us. We must never take His blessings for granted. We must constantly remind ourselves that God has created all of us and we must continually give thanks.

We must enter into a meaningful dialogue with Him, opening fresh channels of intimate conversation. We must be diligent. Even when we are tired, feeling low, and miserable, we must pray. When we are joyous we pray. When we are busy, we must make time to pray, for nothing takes precedence over our conversation with God.

We must pray in right earnest, with a positive approach, without letting feelings of doubt creep in. We must always pray, imploring God to give us that which He deems proper for us, as we are not wise enough to realize the importance of His decisions. We are His children, unaware and ignorant. We turn to Him for guidance. We completely and unconditionally surrender to the Lord's wishes. When we pray, we must not worry about the outcome, leaving it to God's judgment. He protects us when we pray for what we shouldn't. He knows how to answer our prayers for our benefit.

When we pray, we nurture our soul's health and our mind's well being. We are elevated spiritually and enter a domain where physical requirements are met automatically. Humble Solomon pleaded for spiritual discernment, and how was he rewarded? God blessed him with wisdom and the added bonus of material prosperity. He became a Divine-Magnet that attracted all positive energies. It is the Divine Law.

We come to prayer with no expectations. We must not try imposing time frames for God to act; neither must we promise returning His favors by donating a percentage of our income. This is a great insult to God, for He is not an agent thriving and surviving on commissions and cuts. He does not live on alms donated by humanity; He does not care for any remuneration for benefits gained by humans.

And so we arrive before the almighty bearing our soul. We pray often and fervently. We release the mundane issues that might haunt us—family responsibilities, sensual pleasures and worldly delights, official duties, accumulating wealth, and our physical health. We enter a higher plane and now the Divine Almighty will care for us and guide us on our path to righteousness.

Reaching Spirituality

We describe all that is spiritual in many ways: holy, sacrosanct, revered, consecrated, blessed, divine, hallowed, heavenly, and sanctified, to name a few. To reach spirituality is to achieve the highest level of the mind. To become one with the holiest of spirits, to reach out and embrace His word and accept all that he has to offer. A truly spiritual person loves all that is, for God has created it.

Spirituality is the end-product of the prayer of faith. True spirituality is reached through the milestones of prayer. It does not merely mean covering the body with the garb of a mendicant or a celibate, wearing a cross or other symbol, or masquerading as an ascetic in the woods or in a cave. It does not mean that one must suppress one's normal desires.

Spirituality is a state of mind. It is the highest domain of the mind, where the mind experiences an unparalleled ecstasy. We are guided to the glory of God, our spiritual master. He eliminates all darkness, all fears and worries, to a state of pure ecstasy.

Spirituality is the state of being incorporeal, without material body and substance. It refers to a complete and pure connection with 'the Truth', 'the Light', 'the Source', 'the Fountainhead'.... God

The virtue of spirituality is quite self evident, because what we strive to seek throughout our life is the soul, which we discover as soon as we remove the superficial coverings of sheaths and layers that hide it. Our entire lifelong quest is a spiritual one.

Spirituality is intertwined with another great virtue, that of faith in the Creator. We completely surrender our minds, body, and soul to the Lord and have complete trust that he will watch over and take care of us.

Section III: Searching for Meaning

*Let God be the Pilot
As We Board the Aircraft of Prayer*

Awareness

God has given us the power of awareness: self-awareness, the awareness of the world around us, and the awareness of a higher force.

Self-awareness is our awareness that we exist as individuals separate from other people, with private thoughts and individual rights. We are also aware of those around us and that they are similarly self-aware.

God has given us awareness of the world we live in, the beauty of all his creations and the numerous worlds out there that we can only imagine as we gaze in the sky.

We are aware that God has created us and all that surrounds us. Through this awareness we are led to God and pray before him in awe of all He has created. We look up wondrously at the complexity and beauty of the universe and all it contains, of the marvels of our planet, and the miracle of our life.

We turn to God to seek a higher understanding of our relationship with Him. Our awareness leads to our curiosity and search for meaning in our life and all that exists around us. We pray and feel closer to the meaning, for He is guiding us on the path to spiritual ascension, to an all-knowing place where the secrets are revealed. We pray for understanding and higher meaning. We are elevated with His knowledge.

Consciousness about Reality and Illusion

Everything that exists is through our conscious. Everything we see, hear, feel, and touch are a part of a universal consciousness. Our reality is a projection within the universal consciousness. Without our consciousness, nothing exists. All that exists is our conscious.

Enlightenment is the realization that we all a part of the universal consciousness. We are the universal spirit observing from a particular view. We are all part of the same consciousness. We are all one and the same. We are each the source of our consciousness and through it we create our own experiences.

Everything is possible because everything exists within us.

Every action causes a chain of actions that are dependent on that initial action. Everything is linked to its 'first cause.' Evolution of that cause could never result in any effect foreign to that cause. In essence, they have to be the same. They have to be parts of a chain, one the beginning and the other the end-link.

All that is observed is connected and a variation of the same thing. If everything stems from one consciousness, it must all be variations of the same substance. Though variant in form, designs, style, or color, these schematic permutations and combinations all stem from the same origin.

All events and occurrences likewise stem from our consciousness as well, and what may appear to be a circumstantial coincidence, or a condition, or a feeling, or a material object, is invariably the product or result of one's own consciousness.

Nature, therefore, cannot be termed as being external to the mind. We are part of nature and nature is part of us. Neither can exist in isolation, not can they be viewed as separate entities of each other. Man and nature complement and supplement one another. Man and the universe are one and the same.

We must turn to the subjective center that stems from our consciousness and is at the essence of all existence, making a purposeful departure from the objective appearance of persons and materials, of feelings and thoughts. This will lead us to the knowledge we need to fulfill the aspirations and satiate the spiritual appetite. In the midst of apparent contradictions and maladies, miseries and traumas that one encounters in life, there is only this single principal in operation, and that is the human consciousness.

We are all of one mindset. Whether rich, poor, a banker, a baker, or a burglar, we are all of one mind and one consciousness. Each has their own perspective on the universal consciousness that includes us all. They are by different arrangement, different combinations and permutations of only one mind, in relation to the environment. That's the reason why the same person could be any and all of these at different points in his life. Health, wealth, beauty, and genius are not created; they are only manifested by the mind's arrangement of various ongoing processes, under the sole control of the consciousness.

Scientific Prayer

Trough scientific prayer, we try to understand reality and make sense of the world around us. Why do the waves rise and fall? How does the earth go around the sun? How is fire created? What comprises the basic elements that combine to form all we know?

We are wondrous in the many miracles that nature performs. How the earth rotates and revolves around the sun, giving us days, years, and the seasons. How the sun lights our world and provides energy and substance to the life on our planet. How the vast oceans separate our lands; how innumerable rivulets and streams flow endless miles in different directions eventually end up in a sea.

Just as there are patterns and cycles to all that exists in the world around us, so to does our life fit in this pattern, our prayers guide us towards Communion with the Creator, the Originator of all that is wondrous around us.

Finding Serenity

Finding serenity when we pray allows peace to sheath us and protect us. Serenity soothes us, nourishes our mind and frees our soul. We can reach a state of serenity through prayer. Prayer is a powerful medicine that wipes away the worries and strains of our everyday life that may lead to disease and depression.

When we do not allow our body to bathe in serenity, when we run from activity to activity and do not take time out to thank God and appreciate all He has given us, then stress and tension seep into our life. We are swept up in a self-destructive cycle of turbulence, which leads to anxiety, depression, violence, and even thoughts of self-destruction.

When we are overcome with pain, we may lose our faith and stray towards evil and sin. Prayer and meditation can lead us from a path of self-destruction. Only the thoughts of our origin, and of the Creator, have the remedial power to save us from lust, ego, anger, and greed.

Once the mind is directed towards prayer, it grows stronger and does not succumb as easily to the lure of vices, even in the face of the greatest provocation or threat.

In the absence of prayer, faith, and serenity, the mind can succumb to evil and wreak indescribable havoc on the human mind. Humanity has suffered immensely on account of the demons that overtake the mind.

As history has shown, it takes but one spoiled to cause great destruction and devastation. History has been a mute witness to innumerable events where one angry man has led hordes of 'sheep' to conquer other lands, plundering houses of worship, indulging in gruesome rape and ruthless murder, in the name of sadistic pleasure. Prayer has been known to cure

such violent minds as we see in the examples of the Greek conqueror Alexander 'the great,' India's Buddhist ruler Ashoka 'the great,' the Mongolian invader Taimur 'the lame,' India's Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb the 'Zealous,' and countless others. They repented for their sins against God and humanity, and turned towards the last refuge of prayer.

With the gift of prayer, God has given us the power to overcome immorality, to shield ourselves from evil, to accept our shortcomings and not let ego, lust, anger, greed, jealousy, hatred and vengeance rule our lives.

We Are Never Alone

If we enter into life with the feeling that we are alone, that everything depends upon us, then we are bound to drown in tension and apprehension, frustration and turmoil.

We look at the many people that walk the earth with us, and the multitude of species that crawl, walk, fly, and swim our great planet. Yet so many feel alone, with no purpose or guidance. They may look at the vast heavens above and feel worthless.

We crave a foundation, a basis for our existence. This has led us to seek a greater self within, a guide, an immortal presence. We seek out God and feel a calm comfort knowing that we are not alone, that He watches over us and gives each of our lives meaning.

Knowing that God is with us liberates our minds and allows our spirits to soar. We are reassured and comforted by his presence. We find solace and peace knowing that He will never leave us.

With God at our side, we find courage and valor, the ability to dare and do, to reach somewhere to achieve some remarkable feat. Those who stand alone, shiver in the corners of isolation, the deep dark dungeons of misery.

Those who have admitted God into their lives achieve wondrous feats, and test the boundaries of man's capabilities. The ability to believe, to open the door to God's light, is within each of us. God is within us, willing us to believe and achieve. Allow him into your life and feel His power and glory, and you will never feel alone.

Attunement

To attune means put in tune, to adjust, to be one with. When we are attuned to God, we give ourselves over and allow His voice to speak to our soul. We listen and become fully attuned to Him and His word. We feel at one with our Supreme Creator. When we are attuned to the Lord, we arrive at a state of complete peace of mind.

Attunement with the Divine gives everything, however small and insignificant it may seem, meaning and purpose. When we are attuned with God, we find love and peace and feel the powerful spirit seep through us. We find the rhythm of life and feel the heartbeat of ourselves in sync with the heart and soul of our world. Everything seems to have a place and a reason. We are understanding, tolerant, and at peace.

Attunement may be found through daily meditation or prayer; not a self-seeking prayer, but a selfless prayer to the Divine, inviting Him into one's consciousness. Attunement may manifest itself through various forms of music and art, for all creative instincts are godly attributes and manifestations.

Whether it be a musician, painter, sculptor, actor, or photographer, the artist's creative spark is the purest form of spiritual communication. The artists generate their best works only when they abandon their ego, and merge with the Divine, letting their creativity take over the reigns of their subtle minds. The mind has its limitations, but creativity is infinite, and when the artist allows himself to surrender to his art with all his passion and soul, he becomes closer to the Creator.

Conquering Obstacles

Humanity has not fully realized the incredible potential of spiritual wealth, and it is a sad reflection of our life and times. Instead, we are often blinded by material gains and the unhealthy pursuit of competition, of acquiring more than our neighbor for the mere sake of having the most, the best. But material wealth is a hollow wealth that leaves us empty and malnourished.

What we crave, what is essential to all humanity is the power of spiritual wealth. Through prayer, we are empowered and enlightened. Prayer is a potent force that can banish our greatest demons and enable us to soar to a higher plane.

The greatest obstacle to spirituality is fear. Fear forms the basis of all insecurity, tension, anxiety, worry, and depression. It paralyzes us and prevents us from making sound decisions and moving forward to fulfillment. Instead fear leads us on a winding path through misery, turmoil, trauma, and virtual death.

Fear stems from spiritual insecurity. When one prays and communicates with God, he finds not only solace and solitude, but also the conviction and fortitude to tackle the forces of fear.

Humans have been blessed by the Creator with the unique power of Reason. It is through reason that we can understand and communicate, believe, and progress.

The ability to reason, combined with faith and spirituality, have unlocked us from the chains of fear that impede progress. The ability to reason has empowered humanity to dare to scale mountains, dive off cliffs, and swim across oceans. It has enabled us to venture into uncharted territories, reach the moon, find cures for diseases, make magnificent progress in science

and technology, invent machines that make our everyday life easier, and discover resources that lie below the earth's surface.

The wondrous effects of prayer have been proven scientifically. Patients for whom prayers were offered in hospitals have been recorded as having responded to treatment, more effectively, positively and quickly. Records from the University of Redlands and San Francisco General Hospital, both in California, and the PEAR-program at Princeton University, New Jersey, amply support this contention.

Humans overcome challenges, difficulties, and hostile circumstances by arming themselves with spiritual faith. By truly believing that they can achieve anything they set out to do with God at their side. This attests to the immense power of spiritual wealth, faith, and reason that exists in all of us.

Acceptance

Acceptance of God's will is essential for prayer to be effectively heard and answered. We must have unwavering faith in the Lord and all His power. We must feel him with us, guiding us, and listening to our prayer.

We must surrender ourselves completely to Him. Through devotional worship, we express gratitude for God's many gifts and creations. We offer prayer with complete faith, accepting that He is our God, Savior, Ruler, and Guide.

As we pray, we must also accept God's will and know he is the decider of our destiny. He alone knows what is good for us. We are mere children, ignorant in his shadow and must recognize that God's will is the chosen path.

Acceptance also means that we accept each other, as we are, for we are all God's creatures created in his image. We do not judge others nor force them to change. When we see others struggling, we must remember how difficult life's many challenges can be and be understanding, patient, and helpful.

Section IV: Reaping the Benefits of Prayer

*The Results Shall Transform Your Life
COMPLETELY*

Faith and Trust

Faith and destiny go hand and hand, for those who have faith and trust in the Lord are rewarded with a bountiful destiny. .

Faith is the guiding force that encourages us and fills us with hope and determination to fulfill our destiny. Those who lack faith are resigned to a worthless existence, with no motivation or reason.

Through optimism, hope, and prayer, we can reach new heights, soar to incredible lengths. Whatever we desire is within our grasp for we believe it to be. We strive and are encouraged to move on with all our heart and soul poured into God's image in our mind.

Conversely, a lack of faith would be a disbelief in that which you desire. It is a torturous, sad way to live. It hollows out ones soul and his existence is an empty shadow of what could have been if faith were allowed to enter.

As it is said, 'Faith can move mountains.' When faith in God is felt by all, and mutual trust exists between humans, there shall be peace and harmony and a hope for a world without war and evil.

Faith is the awareness of the reality that God personifies. We trust in Him and the destiny he has in store for us.

Intercession and Confession

Intercessional prayer is the act of praying for others. It is a completely selfless prayer, and because of that, is the most rewarding prayer. God hears this prayer and answers it quickly for it is the most sincere of prayer, for it brings with it no reward for the person who prays.

A prayer said without sincerity is worthless words recited in vain. A prayer recited by rote without understanding or thought is nothing more than hypocrisy.

All prayers must be serious and sincere. The reason that some prayers remain unanswered can be ascribed to insincerity on the part of the person offering the prayer.

Confessions are another act of prayer and must also be said with sincerity. When confession is offered, it must be accompanied by a change in one's behavior or actions. When one seeks forgiveness but repeats the same misdeeds over and over again, his confession is not just meaningless, but blasphemous and malicious, an insult to God.

God has provided that the actual refuge lies within our own self; and so we must try to be sincere to ourselves, as we are created in God's own image. Only then shall God hear our prayers, and acting on them shall forgive us, reward us, and bless us.

Essence of Selfless Service

If selfless prayer is the highest form of pray, selfless service is the greatest act we can commit, a direct path to enlightenment.

Prayer and meditation can guide us on the chosen path, but it must be accompanied by selfless service to have true meaning and not merely be an exercise in futile, empty words.

Immense spiritual growth results from serving and sharing knowledge, from loving and understanding others.

We must all include selfless service in our lives. Some blessed ones go the next level and devote their very existence to self-serving humanity with no selfish motives or gains.

Those leaders who sustain and nurture the growth and well being of others are the true and humble “servants of the Lord.” They seek no reward or recognition, no laurels or accolades for their services to humanity. Their service is authentic and credible; they are the blessed ones who shall be rewarded by God.

Unfortunately there are those that pretend to serve selflessly but have disguised motives and ulterior designs. There is no fooling God for he is all-knowing. Others seek out recognition and appreciation for their service. This is not true selfless service. To truly self serve, do not seek public platforms. The greatest gifts are given anonymously, for that truly takes away any self-serving benefit one might receive.

Grace of Humility

Humility is the quality of being humble, the lack of false pride.

It is important that we remain humble as we pray before God. That we understand that God is all powerful, and that we are mere mortals that stand before him and offer prayer. That the universe knows no ends, its vastness is far greater than any thought or deed we can accomplish. Understanding that, from the smallest flea to the great blue whale, we are all God's creations.

We are humbled by the presence of God and the opportunity to pray before Him. We are humbled by our mortality, that we are only allotted so much time. When we face our mortality and humility, we understand that power, prestige, and wealth are not nearly as meaningful and that there is no place for arrogance, greed, and egotism. We strive instead to serve others and make the world better for the future generations that will replace us.

Humility must not be confused with timidity and weakness. A humble person is confident and does not ask for fame or fortune nor does he flaunt his wealth, intellect, and other gifts he may possess.

God does not favor he who is self-occupied and boasts to others of his wealth. Those that live such a life carry the burden of always trying to be better, greater, richer, the most accomplished, and most superior. He is bound to be let down by himself, knowing that such great expectations can not always be met and that defeat and humiliation may await just around the corner.

The humble man makes no claims and does not waste time comparing himself to others and feeding his ego by accumulating mindless possessions. Yet the Lord rewards the humble man and he is often full of a rich and abundant life filled with reward.

The Joy in Giving

Our greatest fulfillment in life is in the act of giving. When we give to others, we feel a shared joy. For in making their life better, we feel joyous and have thus made our life better.

Giving leads to humility and wisdom. Giving is God's way, and when we give we emulate Him and please Him.

There is immense elation in giving what another needs. The joy obtained from giving is far greater than that of receiving from others.

Giving is much more than merely material gifts. One can give time, energy, talent and creativity, advice, a listening ear, a kind word of encouragement, love, moral support, spiritual guidance, and even forgiveness, for forgiving others is also a form of giving. Those who are in a position to give must be grateful to God that they have the opportunity to give and share joy with others. When we give to others unconditionally, we are rewarded manifold.

When judgment day arrives, we are judged by what we contribute to the growth of others, to our neighbors and friends, to strangers, and to society at large. Here on earth, we live in a world where material wealth, money, and possessions may impress others, but our actual net worth is calculated by the measures of our willingness to give, without an eye on profit.

Compassion and Mercy

God teaches us to have compassion and mercy. All things that exist are part of the Divine plan, are created from God, and are imbued with the Divine spark. We must have compassion and mercy for all, empathize and sympathize with those around us. Help those that are weak, forgive those who do evil, tolerate those that we do not agree with.

In showing compassion and mercy, we must be tolerant of others. We are all created in the image of our beloved God. We must follow in God's path by accepting all his children without prejudice.

It is fear that causes some people to put down and abuse other races, groups, religions, and cultures. This intolerance leads to acts of destruction and violence. One must embrace mercy and tolerance so as not to be overcome by their insecurities, fears, and envy.

Compassion enables acts of giving. When we care and understand others, we find joy in philanthropic activities and service. These acts are justly rewarded by God, who is pleased when we give ourselves selflessly.

Healing

Spiritual healing is a real phenomenon. The mind and body are connected. They work as one. When we feed our spirit with prayer, we nourish and help heal our body from disease, pain, and infection and provide a strengthened immunity against future illness. The power of prayer is a potent force that should never be underestimated.

Spiritual healing is not about ‘willing’ disease or illness to go away. It is about the strong mind–body connection and the power of spirituality. It has been documented that patients in hospitals respond favorably to treatment when prayers are offered for their recuperation.

Physical pain is a reflection of spiritual pain. The physical and spiritual work together and feed of each other.

You must have pure faith to experience the power of spiritual healing. Every fiber of your body and soul must believe in the power of prayer to heal. Simply clear your mind of doubts and fears and restore faith, resume nurturing the sense of belief in that power above all. Know that the inhabitant within is the Divine, that His presence is perfect. Just go about trusting Him.

When we cure our selves with prayer, we cleanse our soul and speak directly to God. He empowers us to be strong and healthy.

By willing yourself to be well, you simply involve yourself and become aware of your body and all its functions and malfunctions. You are an energetic, dynamic, and forceful participant in your body’s well-being.

When your spirit is healthy and aware, so to shall be your body. The perfect spirit achieves the perfect body. It is this clear and truthful

perception of perfection that becomes the basis of all spiritual healing. Believe you are well, and you are well. Believe that you are vigorous, and you are that.

Gratitude

We have arrived in this blessed world through the generosity and love of our wondrous Creator, to whom we are forever beholden. We must never pass an opportunity to show gratitude. The Lord's name should be on our lips and in every breath we take. When we are home and away, when we lie down and stand up, in daytime and nighttime, we must always be grateful and give praise to the Lord. He pervades our every thought, conscious and subconscious.

One who forgets the Lord and all he has done is doomed to an empty, thankless life. The ungrateful person shall suffer and see little happiness for he fails to remember that God is the eternal light that shines on our life and hears our prayers. The ungrateful person exploits, is lazy, greedy, egocentric, and selfish.

The sinner is unfaithful to himself; he is ignorant and shallow. He does not know the essence of all, the One who gave him body, soul and peace. He is lured in by temptations and is filled with greed and corruption.

God blessed us with our body and soul, our senses, and the miraculous breath of life. He has given us gifts of joy, love, knowledge, music, art, and wonder. He has nurtured us and allowed us to thrive, create, invent, and discover. We enshrine the generous Lord for he is our Ruler, Creator, Giver, and Divine.

Blessings

God blesses us everyday with life and the world around us. He gives us the air we breathe, the food we eat, the clothes we wear, and the houses that shelter us. He blesses us with our family and friends, and the ability to love, give, understand, feel compassion, generosity, tolerance, and humility. He blesses each of us with beauty inside and out, with knowledge, talents, and creativity.

He blesses all mankind with miracles all around us. He gives us the beauty of a rainbow, the amazing wonder of waterfalls and vast oceans, the glorious spectrum of sunsets, and the spectacular mountains that rise to the heavens.

The greatest blessing He gives is the ability to pray to Him and feel the presence of the Lord in our lives through our spirituality.

God blesses those who have faith in Him and appreciate the blessings that fill their lives. He gives us faith, hope, optimism, endurance, perseverance, sincerity, courage of conviction, and selfless-service.

When we feel sad or dejected, we must count our blessings, appreciate all we have and thank God.

Morality

Morality refers to the conduct of a person in regard to right or wrong. Society sets up moral boundaries, an agreed set of standards, and ethics; guidelines that we mutually agree to be right and wrong.

We enhance our morality through prayer. Prayer helps us understand right from wrong as it guides us on the path of enlightenment.

The rules and regulations set forth by society prevent chaos, they safeguard society from degeneration and ultimate decay. God blessed man with the ability to live in a civilized society, to create laws and rules that govern our behavior and allow us to live together in near harmony. In this capacity, God has distinguished man from other lower species.

Morality thus leads to a more peaceful state. On an individual level, a moral person can aspire to salvation. On a grander scale, peace of mind leads to peace between peoples. Through morality, order is restored and people can invest their energy in other endeavors. Rather than fighting and wars, they can invest their time and energy in science and art, in creating and exploring, and advancing civilization.

Generosity

Generosity reflects the quality of giving and sharing in an unselfish and magnanimous manner. When one is generous, he expects nothing in return. The generous person is bountiful in his giving, in the same manner as God, the benefactor of great bounties. When we become generous and giving, we are adopting godly attributes.

Generosity need not be limited to material objects or money to charity. One can be generous with their love, knowledge, or the time they take to listen to a friend's problems.

When one is generous in their spirit, he demonstrates tolerance and goodwill, love, peace, understanding, and forgiveness. God is the most generous of all, giving us life and all we have in it, and we adopt godly attributes when we bestow our generosity on others. We feel elevated to a higher spiritual level and experience new joys, for there is no greater pleasure or godly act than generously giving to others while expecting nothing in return.

Patience

Patience is a virtue that brings us closer to God. Patience, glory and honor are bestowed upon those who listen to the Name of the Lord. That yearning soul, whose heart remains merged with the Lord, obtains glorious greatness.

We develop the quality of patience when our prayers are not answered, and yet, we continue praying, persistently and faithfully.

We must work for our Lord and Master, dispelling all our doubts. Humble devotees have the strength and endurance of trees. The God-conscious being has a steady patience, like the earth, which bears the ignominy and cruelty of being dug up and trampled upon; but the same earth is later anointed with fruits and flowers and grains and vegetables to feed all creation. Edison failed repeatedly; he made 2000 attempts before succeeding in inventing the light bulb, a great service to humanity.

In today's strife-torn environment, tolerance and patience is the key.

Patience is cultivated through unanswered prayers. Perseverance results in rewards. God tests aspirants by creating impediments to see whether the effort put in by the devotees deserve to be acceptance. Glory and honor are bestowed upon those who listen to the Name of the Lord. The yearning soul, whose heart remains merged with the Lord, obtains greatness. We must pray to our Master, dispelling the doubts of our minds. Pain and trouble makes our bonding with God strong. When we seek some favor from a fellow-human, we persist in asking; but, when our prayer is not answered, we even go to the extent of doubting God's very existence. This is undesirable, and becomes the cause of failure of our petition being heard.

Forgiveness

The Lord forgives the many sins of man, and so to, we must practice forgiveness. As we pray for our own forgiveness, we pray for those we forgive and all those who seek forgiveness.

When we forgive, we are rejuvenated and our soul is purged of evil. The forgiver and forgiven are bound by a powerful, healing force. Hate and vengeance are transformed into love and peace.

Those who have Truth as their fast, contentment as their sacred shrine of pilgrimage, spiritual wisdom and meditation as their cleansing bath, kindness as their deity, and forgiveness as their chanting beads, are the really emancipated souls.

Forgiveness heals the recipient, but it also heals, manifold, the one who forgives. It is reflective: forgiveness is energy transmitted through feelings. One may search endlessly, but when one finally drinks the ambrosial nectar, by adopting the way of tolerance, one surrenders one's mind to the Truthful One.

We must abide in truth and contentment. Hold tight to compassion and the sanctuary of the True Master. Knowing one's soul, and knowing the Supreme Soul, associating with the Inner Self, one shall be emancipated.

If the soul-bride adorns herself with compassion and forgiveness, God is pleased, and her mind is illumined with the lamp of the attribute of godly wisdom.

With happiness and in ecstasy, she offers her soul to Him. Such souls who adopt the way of the Lord as their loin-cloth, and intuitive awareness as their ritualistically purified enclosure, and good deeds as their ceremonial

fore-head mark are very rare, indeed, and they are the really blessed ones, and they shall enjoy Divine fellowship. All ceremonies are merely hollow rituals, nothing else.

Because of a lack of patience and forgiveness, countless human beings have perished. By the blessing of the Lord's word and by entering the mansion of the Lord's presence, one shall be blessed with patience, forgiveness, truth and peace.

All forgiveness commences with self-forgiveness. When we offer an honest confession, accompanied by a sincere prayer for pardon, God forgives us without hesitation, and blesses us. As we are made in the image of God, we must become forgiving towards others, for God is forgiving. Without practicing this attribute, we are not eligible to seek and to receive forgiveness from God. What we give shall we receive, and we will receive in abundance. We shall become the honored recipients of the blessings accruing from His forgiveness.

Love

When we pray and show our love for God, all our earthly relationships become peaceful and joyous as well. We are able to experience boundless levels of joy and find love and deeper connections in all our relationships.

God is love, and those who dwell in love, God resides in their hearts, for the highest form of love is Godly love. Love has the potential of changing one's overall perspective for the betterment of self and others.

All religious and spiritual deeds need love to blossom and have meaning. Those done with an empty heart have no purpose or direction and are merely exercises in futility. Sincere, heart-felt love and the relationships we form through love are integral aspects of the path to enlightenment and progression towards self-realization.

The meaning in each relationship is found in the mutual benefit each participant experiences. Joy and harmony prevail in strong, stable relationships where each person has equal status. One must never try to dominate a relationship.

Those we are closest to, we form loving relationships that are the essence of our being. These are our partners, family, and dearest friends. But we also form many other relationships—with people we work with, the people we come in contact with regularly, and the chance encounter we may have with a complete stranger. Feeling connected to all, even strangers, is the key to knowing one's own soul.

We should always look to form new connections. Truly, there's no greater happiness than forming bonds and getting to know others. When we open up to others, we open up our soul to experience intense love and joy with those around us. One must never harbor any fear of plunging into new,

healthy relationships. If one tries to connect and succeeds in making friends, there is an infinite joy. If one fails to connect for any reason, that is fine, too. Pray for forgiveness for any negativity and move on to find more satisfying relationships.

Attaining the highest state of consciousness, one experiences and lives in the blessed realm where all people appear to be connected and are known, dear, lovable and close. This is a positive effect of prayer, for through prayer we feel connected to God and all his creations.

Turning Sadness into Joy

Anyone feeling sadness should turn to god and pray sincerely. Through prayer we can find inner peace and joy.

When one is feeling depressed, prayer is the mediation that will turn sadness into joy. Open up to those around you, share your sorrows and emotions. Meditate and engage in sincere prayer.

Sadness is an essential part of life, for without sadness one could not appreciate the sweet bliss of joy. Sadness helps us feel compassion for other and motivates us to repent for our sins. Through sadness, God helps change and purify our hearts. However, ignoring sadness and shunning prayer can cause extreme tension, ill-health, and mental-aggravation, sometimes leading even to suicide.

Anyone afflicted with sadness must pray sincerely. It is helpful to busy oneself with some distraction from the worrisome 'routine and schedule.' Mingle with spiritually oriented people and reduce your burden of worries and often-imaginary problems. Share your dreams, sorrows and emotions with others. Continue trusting God.

There are ups and downs in everyone's life. With God we can face the downs and turn sadness into joy. If we continue focusing our attention towards God, the confusing changes, the frustrations, depressions and uncertainties of life, shall have no bearing on our stability.

Relief from Anxiety

Prayer can relieve the anxiety we feel from life's everyday pressures. Take the time to relax, find a quiet place, and share your worries with God. Feel the serenity of God's presence.

Find peace in meditation. Talk with your spiritual guide, a family member, or a friend. Sharing your problems unburdens your soul.

Anxiety often occurs after sin, and this can afflict the soul's health. Pray to God for mercy and know that He forgives, for He is patient and understanding. Let the prayer of atonement calm your conscious and free you of the anxiety of guilt.

Anxiety increases pain and prevents attainments. Allow prayer to soothe you, provide calmness. Pray in a slow and calm manner. Take the time to feel and understand the meaning of the prayers you recite. Pray from the heart and feel the wave of anxiety lift as calmness replaces it.

Triumph over Addictions

Those who drink or take drugs to forget their worries and problems adopt a new set of problems as they find their addiction encompasses their life, affects their relationships, drains their finances, and depletes happiness. Those who indulge in narcotic substances become a ghost of themselves, living in a stupor and missing out on the joys of living.

Those who drink more than a celebratory glass now and then are usually hiding from problems they are too weak to face. Perhaps they are escaping serious psychological issues, romantic problems, financial troubles, the pain of a lost loved one, or the guilt of a sin.

It is important to get to the root of why someone drinks or takes drugs, and not merely stop them from indulging in the act. Otherwise their frustrations may crop up in new psychological issues, such as overeating, hypochondria, or various kinds of fears and phobias, compulsions or other addictions.

The cure for addictions is the reorientation of the spiritual self. When one takes on a deeper, all encompassing new sense of being, he is no longer focused on the problems of his life, but sees the positive and guiding light. A larger spiritual identity develops that ensures peace and bliss. This rebirth washes away guilt and fear. The Divine has entered the soul and possessed it and made it an instrument of His presence, power and perfection.

Spiritual Strength and Courage

Strength is the bulwark of physical health, and it rises not from the muscles we flex in our arms, but from the power of our minds and the force of our spirituality. Strength is the power to dare, to dream and act on it, to have the courage of conviction, to believe and have faith.

Just as one must work out to improve ones physical prowess, so to must spiritual strength be cultivated, practiced, and perfected.

Spiritual strength gives us the courage to face our greatest fears. It is fear that immobilizes us, paralyzing us from our aspirations. Fear lurks in the dark corners and seeps into our soul in the guise of anxiety, tension, nervousness and insecurity.

Sincere prayer banishes our fears and casts victory over doubts, inhibitions and insecurities of all varieties. Through prayer, we find purpose in our lives the meaning of the world around us. With faith in God we are secure in ourselves and peace and security give us the strength and courage to dream, dare, and achieve. We feel the presence of God and our fears vanish with the nourishing strength of the Lord.

Optimism

When we pray with Faith and Trust in our hearts, our optimism soars and we pursue our goals even more enthusiastically.

By God's grace, we pray for understanding. Our negative thoughts are pacified and our spiritual aspirations and worldly ambitions are fulfilled. We believe in ourselves and all we can do. We sing the praises of the Lord and we feel cured of sickness, healed from pain, and free of all disease.

Positive thoughts rejuvenate our physical, mental, emotional and psychological health. This has a notable impact on our total well-being, and relationships within the family and in society at large.

Thought is a formative power. As we feel, so do we become; so are our experiences manifested. The mind has the power to make us feel sick and weak, or well and strong; it can be instrumental in making us great optimists, or greatest pessimists. The thought process is effective in directing us to victory or defeat, unto bliss, or landing us in a miserable state of affairs.

Intelligence and Wisdom

God gave humans the unique gift to think and analyze, to seek answers and understand them. Prayer brings out our intelligence and wisdom.

With the power of thought, we can unravel many of the wonders God has created for us.

There is a difference between an educated person and a wise one. A person can be uneducated but blessed with wisdom. There are many religious souls who have never gone to college but have gained wisdom through worship and mastered the highest techniques of Communion with God.

A wealthy and successful person is also not necessarily a wise one. And someone who is a master at one subject, may be completely useless in another. Generally, there is a tendency to become dependant upon such people in various matters, including spiritual-religious and socio-economic, even though the concerned person might not have been conversant with said issues.

Deliverance from Temptation

Temptations are great obstacles that impede our path of discovering God. Through prayer, we can overcome these obstacles. Prayer is a direct route to God.

When we enter the house of God and give ourselves to His glory, we are humbled and free of greed, egotism, and envy. Through sincere prayer, we enable God's qualities into our hearts and souls and are empowered to vanquish evil from our lives.

There is a vast difference between being tempted and actually yielding to that temptation. Prayer empowers us to ward off temptation.

We must look away from temptations and gaze our eyes towards the Lord. We can talk to our spiritual guide or teacher about tempting offers we feel too weak to refuse. Meditate and pray. If we are still subjected to temptations, we must make extra effort to continue resisting them with all the vigor at our command.

There is no element of sin to being tempted, as long as we say "No." When we resist temptation, we feel strengthened and empowered. God is pleased and rewards us for our courage and resilience. We must thank the Lord for giving us this strength and we in turn feel His glorious praises.

Section V: Ten World Religions at a Glance: Symbols and Prayers

*Amity Is The Cornerstone;
Harmony Is The Result.*

Bahai'

SYMBOL OF BAHAI'



The Bahai' symbol has three horizontal lines representing God, His messengers and humanity. The vertical line represents the Word of God which links all three. The two stars represent Baha'u'llah and his herald, the Bab.

BAHAI' PRAYER

Prayer for the departed ~Abdu'l-Bahá

O My God! O Thou forgiver of sins!

Bestower of gifts! Dispeller of affections!

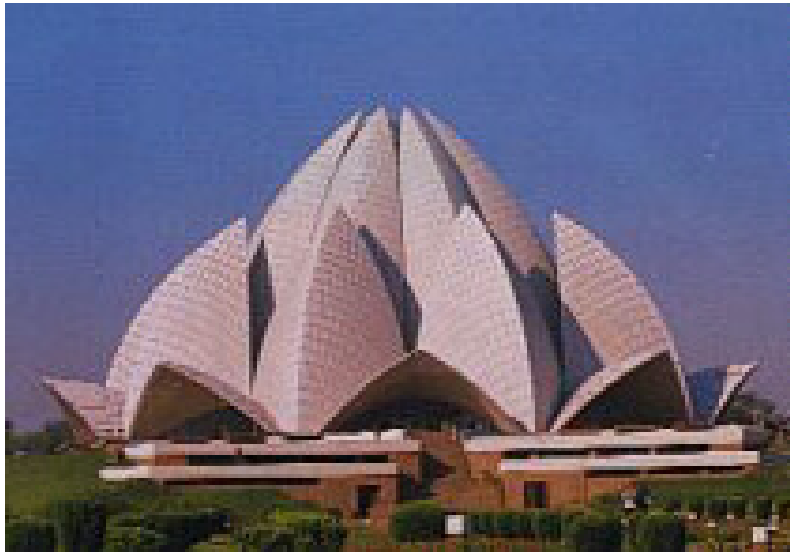
Verily I beseech Thee to forgive the sins of such as have
abandoned the physical garment and have ascended to the
spiritual world.

O My Lord!

Purify them from their trespasses, dispel their sorrows and
change their darkness into light.
Cause them to enter the garden of happiness, cleanse them with
the most pure water,
and grant them to behold Thy splendors on the loftiest mount.

Bahai Temple

New Delhi, India



B A H A I ' *at a glance*

Bahai`s believe in the oneness of God, the oneness of religion and the oneness of humanity. Members represent every culture and ethnic group. There`s unity while preserving cultural diversity.

There is no clergy or emphasis on rituals in the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'ís understand that humankind has entered upon the age of its maturity,. Accordingly, each individual is able to explore the many revelations of God throughout history and decide on the issues for himself. Through prayer, reflection, and consultation with others one is able to make these life decisions. To help make this possible, the Bahá'í scriptures have so far been translated into over eight hundred languages.

God sent prophets of the world`s religions to create an ever-advancing civilization. To Bahai`s, Baha`u'llah is God`s messenger whose purpose is to establish world unity. He wrote about a hundred books.

"Prayer," says `Abdu'l-Bahá, "is conversation with God." Without God making known His mind and will known to humankind, it would be difficult to figure it out independently. Accordingly, God speaks to humankind in a language which can be readily understand by everyone. He does this through the guidance of the Manifestations.

The Manifestations of God have a life force, and speak with humankind face to face; they convey God`s messages. In fact, after their death, their message still continues to reach humankind`s thoughts and minds through the writings and sayings earlier recorded.

Indeed, the Manifestations are able to communicate with humankind independent of the people`s native language or cultural norms. They assist God by interfacing with and inspiring people whose hearts are earnestly seeking out truth.

`Abdu'l-Bahá speaks much of this spiritual language. He says:

“We should speak in the language of heaven -- in the language of the spirit -- for there is a language of the spirit and heart. It is as different from our language as our own language is different from that of the animals, who express themselves only by cries and sounds. It is the language of the spirit, which speaks to God. When, in prayer, we are freed from all outward things and in turn to God, and then it is as if in our hearts we hear the voice of God. Without words we speak, we communicate, we converse with God and hear the answer. All of us, when we attain to a truly spiritual condition, can hear the voice of God.”

The Devotional Attitude

Speaking on the issue of attaining the spiritual condition that allows for conversation with God, `Abdu'l-Bahá says:

“We must strive to attain to that condition by being separated from all things and from the people of the world and by turning to God alone. It will take some effort on the part of man to attain to that condition, but he must work for it, strive for it. We can attain to it by thinking and caring less for material things and more for the spiritual. The further we go from the one, the nearer we are to the other. The choice is ours. Our spiritual perception, our inward sight must be opened, so that we can see the signs and traces of God's spirit in everything. Everything can reflect to us the light of the spirit.”

Bahá'u'lláh has written:

"That seeker... at the dawn of every day... should commune with God, and, with all his soul, persevere in the quest of his Beloved. He should consume every wayward thought from the flame of His loving mention... ”

In the same way, `Abdu'l-Bahá declares:

“When man allows the spirit, through his soul, to enlighten his understanding, then does he contain all creation... but on the other hand, when man does not open his mind and heart to the blessing of the spirit, but turns his soul towards the material side, towards the bodily part of his nature, then he is fallen from his high place

and he becomes inferior to the inhabitants of the lower animal kingdom.”

Again, Bahá'u'lláh writes:

“Deliver your souls, O people, from the bondage of self, and purify them from all attachment to anything besides Me [God]. Remembrance of Me cleanseth all things from defilement, could ye but perceive it... Intone, O My servant, the verses of God that have been received by thee... that the sweetness of thy melody may kindle thine own soul, and attract the hearts of all men. Whosoever reciteth, in the privacy of his chamber, the verses revealed by God, the scattering angels of the Almighty shall scatter abroad the fragrance of the words uttered by his mouth...”

When someone asked `Abdu'l-Bahá whether prayer was necessary considering that God already knows of all humankind's desires, he responded:

“If one friend loves another, is it not natural that he should wish to say so? Though he knows that the friend is aware of his love, does he still not wish to tell him of it? It is true that God knows the wishes of all hearts; but the impulse to pray is a natural one, springing from man's love to God.

...Prayer need not be in words, but rather in thought and action. But if this love and this desire are lacking, it is useless to try to force them. Words without love mean nothing. If a person talks to you as an unpleasant duty, finding neither love nor enjoyment in the meeting, do you wish to converse with him?”

Prayer Indispensable and Obligatory

Even though there is no emphasis on ritual in Bahá'í, the sacred scripture is enjoined, in no uncertain terms, by the faith. Bahá'u'lláh says in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas (His Book of Laws):

“Recite ye the verses of God every morn and eventide. Who so faileth to recite them hath not been faithful to the Covenant of God and His Testament, and whoso turneth away from these holy verses in this Day is of those who throughout eternity have turned away from God. Fear ye God, O My servants, one and all. Pride not yourselves on much reading of the verses or on a multitude of pious acts by night and day; for were a man to read a single verse with joy and radiance it would be better for him than to read with lassitude all the Holy Books of God, the help in peril, the self-subsisting. Read ye the sacred verses in such measure that ye be not overcome by languor and despondency. Lay not upon your souls that which will weary them and weigh them down, but rather what will lighten and uplift them, so that they may soar on the wings of the Divine verses towards the dawning-place of His manifest signs; this will draw you nearer to God, did ye but comprehend.”

`Abdu'l-Bahá says to a correspondent:

"O thou spiritual friend! Know thou that prayer is indispensable and obligatory, and man under no pretext whatever is excused therefrom unless he be mentally unsound or an insurmountable obstacle prevent him."

Another correspondent asked:

"Why pray? What is the wisdom thereof, for God has established everything and executes all affairs after the best order -- therefore, what is the wisdom in beseeching and supplicating and in stating one's wants and seeking help?"

`Abdu'l-Bahá replied:

“Know thou, verily it is becoming in a weak one to supplicate to the Strong One, and it behoveth a seeker of bounty to beseech the Glorious Bountiful One. When one supplicates to his Lord, turns to Him and seeks bounty from His ocean, this supplication brings light to his heart, illumination to his sight, life to his soul and exaltation to his being.”

During thy supplications to God and thy reciting, ‘Thy Name is my healing,’ consider how thine heart is cheered, thy soul delighted by the spirit of the love of God, and thy mind attracted to the Kingdom of God! By these attractions one's ability and capacity increase. When the vessel is enlarged the water increases, and when the thirst grows the bounty of the cloud becomes agreeable to the taste of man. This is the mystery of supplication and the wisdom of stating one's wants.”

Aside from revealing a large body of meditations and prayers that relate to all aspects of life, Bahá'u'lláh also revealed three daily obligatory prayers. The believer is free to choose any one of these three prayers, but is under the obligation of reciting one of them, and in the manner Bahá'u'lláh has prescribed.

While there are prescribed prayers, one should not feel confined to use exclusively these forms, important as those are. While formal prayer plays an important role in Bahá'í, Bahá'u'lláh teaches that, in truth, all the details of one's life should be a prayer. Work executed in an appropriate spirit is also worship, and every thought, word and deed devoted to God and the good of one's fellows is prayer too.

Congregational Prayer

The daily obligation, revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, are to be recited privately with one exception. Bahá'u'lláh ordained that the prayer for the dead should be recited among the congregation. However, it is incumbent upon the believer who reads it aloud, as well as upon those present to stand during its recital. This is in stark contrast to the practice of Islamic

worshippers who stand in rows behind the one who leads the prayer. The Bahá'í faith prohibits this Islamic practice in congregational prayer.

While one might get the impression that Bahá'u'lláh's abolition of professional clergy within the Bahá'í faith means that he attached no value to meetings for worship, but this is not the case. Regarding the importance of gathering for prayer, `Abdu'l-Bahá stated:

“Man may say: ‘I can pray to God whenever I wish, when the feelings of my heart are drawn to God; when I am in the wilderness, when I am in the city, or wherever I may be. Why should I go where others are gathered upon a special day, at a certain hour, to unite my prayers with theirs, when I may not be in a frame of mind for praying?’

To think in this way is useless imagination, for where many are gathered together their force is greater. Separate soldiers fighting alone and individually have not the force of a united army. If all the soldiers in this spiritual war gather together, then their united spiritual feelings help each other, and their prayers become acceptable.”

Some reject the notion that prayer's efficacy as a philosophical impossibility or question how God could interference with the norms of nature. Perhaps an analogy will clarify this issue. If some magnet were placed over metals, they will rise towards the magnet. Obviously, no one would claim that a gravitational law has been broken; on the contrary, that is exactly in line with the nature of the metal objects. The rules of gravity continually act upon the metals, but when the magnet is placed above it, a superior force is now acting upon it. The belief of Bahá'ís parallels this notion; they believe that prayer is able to bring another force into play that can act upon all elements of the world. Even though one is unable to see it or quantify it, prayer brings about tremendous changes in the world.

Even if one is able to accept that prayer can have an effect on the world, they may maintain that prayer is too feeble a force to produce any dramatic changes in the world. But, the only reason that one would assume such a thing is because the skeptic fails to realize the inexhaustible Power of God. All a person must do is put forth the minimal force that initiates

the Divine Bounty. It is ever ready to serve those who have learned how to draw upon it.

Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá have revealed the proper way to draw upon these forces. Countess prayers for all different occasions and purposes have been revealed so that people could tap into the Divine Bounty. It is hard to imagine the import that every word and phrase of these prayers can have on the world. In fact, unless one practices these prayers, reciting them regularly and integrating them into ones daily routines, it is doubtful that one could ever come to a real appreciation for them. Several examples are discussed below:

Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh

“O my Lord! Make Thy beauty to be my food, and Thy presence my drink, and Thy pleasure my hope, and praise of Thee my action, and remembrance of Thee my companion, and the power of Thy sovereignty my succorer, and Thy habitation my home, and my dwelling-place the seat Thou hast sanctified from the limitations imposed upon them who are shut out as by a veil from Thee. Thou art, verily, the Almighty, the All-Glorious, the Most Powerful.”

Prayer of `Abdu'l-Bahá

“O compassionate God! Thanks be to Thee for Thou hast awakened and made me conscious. Thou hast given me a seeing eye and favored me with a hearing ear, hast led me to Thy kingdom and guided me to Thy path. Thou hast shown me the right way and caused me to enter the ark of deliverance. O God! Keep me steadfast and make me firm and staunch. Protect me from violent tests, and preserve and shelter me in the strongly fortified fortress of Thy Covenant and Testament. Thou art the Powerful. Thou art the Seeing. Thou art the Hearing.”

Basic Tenets and Theology

Many people wonder what is the ultimate goal of life. The Bahá'í writings profess that one should aim at moral and spiritual excellence. This is accomplished by aligning one's inner being and outward behavior with the will the Creator. One needs to realize that every person is different and, accordingly, must fulfill a destiny assigned to him by God. This destiny

becomes clearer with every choice one makes and with every opportunity one chooses to engage. Accordingly, the belief and free exercising of humankind's free will is an integral aspect of the Bahá'í Faith. Only through each person exercising their free will can spiritual advancements come about.

While some religions deem physical desires or human nature negatively, the Bahá'í Faith embraces these desires in order to use them for good. The reason that God chose to create these desires is because they are both fundamentally good and essential for human growth. In fact, one may wonder why God chose to place the human soul in a physical vessel at all. The reason is that the physical body is the ideal vessel for bringing about the development of the soul. By placing the soul within a physical body, it is given the opportunity to develop through free will decisions. Furthermore, as all the functions and desires of the body are gradually made to align with the yearnings of the soul, the physical body and its desires itself become tools for the soul to develop even more. This is not to say that unbridled hedonistic drives should go unchecked; instead, they must be used for spiritual growth.

Many drives could be used for good or for evil. The drive for sexual pleasure is one of the most clear cut cases. There can be no doubt that it should be considered one of the greatest gifts that God could bestow upon mankind. Nevertheless, if one cannot learn to control this drive, through legitimate relationships, it can lead to one's downfall.

As the physical body is the means through which the rational soul can act in this world, one of the most important things that one could do is to care for it properly. The Bahá'í Faith vehemently opposes any form of asceticism. The only self-denial that should be practiced in this regard is that which leads to a healthy and normal body. It is not at all surprising that many of the Bahá'í writings include mention of biological processes and the practical laws that relate to them. One of the principal aspects of this is the belief in moderation. As we mentioned earlier, there is no division between the religious life and the secular life in the Bahá'í Faith. Ablutions, nutritional eating habits and many other normal exercises are included in the holy writings.

This does mean that the Bahá'í writings fail to take into consideration all the many physical factors that stand outside of one's control. Obviously,

biological infirmities, or poor nutrition during one's youth may produce major consequences upon one's growth and progress. Nonetheless, one ought to remember that these temporal setbacks cannot negatively impact one's soul. In the worst case, temporal problems only produce temporary setbacks that could be offset by a subsequent push towards spiritual perfection.

Indeed, when one looks back upon his life, he may note that some of the greatest and most beneficial periods of growth and prosperity were directly caused by a prior period of either physical or emotional pain, or even both. So, while we ought to acknowledge that negative social, physical and emotional events may significantly impact our lives, in no way should one come to the conclusion of materialists, that these physical events are the only things that have any importance.

While the Judeo-Christian religions note the importance of "original sin," the Bahá'í writings completely reject such a notion. In truth, there is no aspect of humankind that could be defined as inherently evil or problematic from youth. All religions note that the many aspects and forces within humankind are given specifically and directly by God. Of course, then, these characteristics would be given for our own good. Similarly, Bahá'í rejects the notion of Satan or the devil, and their concomitant impact in the world. Evil, like many rationalists explain, is the absence of good. So, there never is any event in the world that must have a negative outcome. We should remember that everything comes from the God. So, we ought to do our best to see the good in every event.

However, we should remember that every person has the free will to reject the good that is in his life. Just as the sun emits heat, but one could remain in an air conditioned room and never be exposed to that heat, so too one could hide from the good which God implants everywhere in this world. One must actively put forth an effort to develop his spiritual potential. If a person is lax in this area, he will be lacking in his perfection. This is both an individualistic and societal endeavor. If either abstain from doing their part, "dark spots" appear. These points mark areas in the world of imperfection.

Clearly, one of the biggest impediments to true spiritual growth is both pride and conceit. They both put one in the position where he believes that he is more important in the world than he really is. Accordingly, this

person unjustly deems himself better than his fellow man and acts as if he possesses supreme control over all that is around him. The areas of the world in which this person gains some level of control only further buttresses his illusion notion of supremacy. Now it is easy to see why pride could be such an impediment to real spiritual growth: it drives a person towards illusory goals and a reality based on vanity and arrogance.

One might think that one could come to these truths without the benefit of the so-called revealed religions, but Bahá'u'lláh constantly emphasized that these religions were the only avenue to freedom from our lackings. One of his primary messages was that God conveyed the Manifestations for the sole purpose of displaying to the human race the correct and proper road towards spiritual growth. In truth, this is the redemption in which religion proffers. Many times, people want to attach magical elements to religions, such that they will free them from the pain associated with the "original sin," or will safeguard the practitioner from the evil forces in the world. In truth, one of the main purposes of religion is to free us from the imprisonment of some of our base human instincts, and make us aware of a greater path to happiness.

Indeed, one could properly trace most of the evils and perils present in the world today to various groups and people that have rejected the message of true religion and authentic spiritual practices. In truth, independent of all other factors, the Bahá'í faith preaches that the only way to gain salvation is through God, to recognize his contemporaneous Manifestation, and to pursue his doctrines. All that exists in reality, and everything that we possess comes from God. Bahá'u'lláh repeatedly expressed that any person that sincerely ponders over the matter will come to the conclusion that humankind does not, in absolute terms, actually possess anything,

Purpose of Life

Nothing can give one a purpose to life or existence save the true religion. If humankind sprung up as a consequence of a random, non-teleological evolutionary plan, as most people within the scientific community opine, then, it is true, the world would be purposeless. This is true because humankind would be nothing more than their temporal physical existence, paralleling the reality of any other animal within the universe.

Traditions

Individualism is put to the forefront within the Bahá'í faith. This level of personal cultivation is primarily expressed in terms of meditation and the daily prayers. These two avenues allow the soul to break free of its preconceived paths and go in new, better directions. One way in which this is accomplished is by breaking down the religious divides and prejudices so prevalent throughout the world. Also, by steering clear of both drugs and alcohol, except in the case of a medical necessity, the individual is further able to express himself in his own terms without the crushing force of mind altering treatments.

Also, the Bahá'í faith rejects social ascetism in which one withdraws from all worldly things including society. It all comes down to how one looks at his fellow human beings: are they an impediment to true spiritual growth or do they help enable one to grow even stronger and faster? This is not to say that intermittent withdrawals may not be helpful, but they must be viewed within the big picture. As human beings are social animals, everything must be refracted through that outlook. Accordingly, the most direct route in which one may progress is through the interactions we have with one another.

Role of Women and Family

The institution of marriage is one of the strongest and most important bonds within the world. Bahá'u'lláh always wrote that marriage is one of the very foundations of humankind. Within a marriage, there is sanctity with brings about a sense of equality and fairness between the partners. When there are any issues, accordingly, discussion and consultation are advocated.

Holidays and Festivals

The Baha'i Faith preaches that there are nine holy days in which one ought to refrain from normal work practices. Several of these are birthdays of holy Baha'i figures including November twelfth when Baha'u'llah was born and October twentieth when Bab was born

One of these holidays is the New Year for both the Baha'i Faith and those people of Iran called Naw-Ruz (which can be translated as 'New Day').

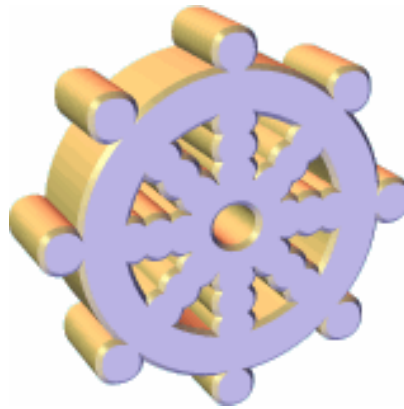
Like many new years, it coincides with the vernal equinox, which, depending on the year, will be around the twenty-first of March.

There are various ways in which to celebrate the New Year, but, in general, there will be a time of communal prayer, a celebration and, for some, there is gift-giving. The celebration will have a dinner aspect. This is because the day before the New Year, there is a fast. But, one should not get the impression that there are many set rules about the way in which one must celebrate the New Year, or any other Baha'i holiday. Really, there are but a few.

The second holiday is one that is commemorative. It is twelve days of remembering announcement of Baha'u'llah that he is a prophet. The festival is called Rivdan (Paradise, garden) after the Najibiyyih Garden in Baghdad as Baha'u'llah stayed once during this twelve day period. It also recalls the day that the prophet left from Baghdad in 1863. Like all holidays, it starts at sunset on the twentieth of April. Work need not be stopped throughout the whole twelve day period; instead only the first, the ninth and the last day of the festival are holy days for the Baha'i Faith.

Buddhism

SYMBOL OF BUDDHISM



The Dharma Wheel

The Dharma Wheel symbolizes the teachings of the Founder (Buddha) which extend to all living things.

BUDDHIST PRAYER

The Heart-Sutra

The personification of compassion, in deep meditation, saw that the five elements are empty, thus transcending misfortune and suffering.

Form and vacuum are the same, in essence. Feeling, thought, volition and consciousness are the same, too. Dharma is fundamentally, a vacuum.
There is no birth, no death.

Nothing is defiled, and nothing pure. Nothing can increase or decrease. No eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind; no ignorance, and no end to ignorance; no old age and death, and no end to it.

No suffering, no craving, no extinction, no path, no wisdom, no attainment. Indeed, there is nothing to be attained. There is, now, no semblance of any hindrance or any fear.

Far beyond delusion, Nirvana is here, already: Supreme enlightenment, everywhere.

This is the greatest Mantra of all: the Prajnaparamita; so chant this Mantra continually, for it the truth.

Utter:

Gate ‘, Gate’, Paragate’; Para Sam Gate’, Bodhi Svaha.

Buddhist
Temple (Thai)



B U D D H I S M

at a glance

Buddhism was founded about 525 B.C. in India, by Prince Gautama Siddhartha, later known as The Buddha (the Enlightened One). . The approximate date of his birth is given as 563 B.C., and death 483 B.C. This religion originated with his personal understanding of the meaning of life

The Tripitaka (Three Baskets), comprised of more than 100 volumes, is the sacred Scripture. The major divisions of Buddhism are Theraveda and Mahayana. 'Theraveda' means "the way of the elders", and it embodies, most faithfully the teaching of Gautama and the early leaders of the movement. Buddhism bases its philosophy on three collections of ancient scriptures known as the 'Tripitika' or 'The Three Baskets'. These were declared authoritative at councils of monks held in the first two centuries, after the death of Buddha. Theraveda persists in such Southern Asian countries as Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand.

Mahayana means 'the great vehicle' (of Salvation). It originated, as an alternative to Hinayana (smaller vehicle), sometime around the beginning of the Christian era.

The majority of Buddhists do not believe in the existence of God. Others call Buddha, God, or a universal, enlightened consciousness.

Enlightenment, prosperity and healing come from the chanting of Mantras or secret hymns, expressing devotion to the Law of Karma. There is no soul, and no spirit. Buddhists do not believe in heaven or hell.

While Buddhism itself is an offshoot of Hinduism, there are four branches of Buddhism: Zen, Shoshu, Nichiren and Tibetan. The wheel is a commonly recognized Buddhist symbol, denoting Buddha's teachings. His very first sermon 'set in motion the wheel of the Doctrine'. In some cultures, the wheel is used as a symbol of the sun, eternity and the cycle of life. A famous saying professes: "Better than a thousand useless words is one single word that renders peace".

Buddhism is the major faith in Sri Lanka (formerly known Ceylon), Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. Buddhism and Shintoism, in Japan embody religions that are syncretic in nature in that they intermingle many religious ideas. It was inevitable that the wide diffusion and long history of this religion, in so many varied cultures of the world, should result in the emergence of a variety of forms and colors of Buddhism. Several Buddhist sects abound and flourish, in harmony with one another. Even where sects have not proliferated, the mainstream Buddhist teachings have merged into the religious thoughts and practices that prevailed in the regions, prior to the advent of Buddhism.

Some of the differences between the two sects are greatly irreconcilable.

Buddha grew up in Hindu-India, with its emphasis on idol-worship as a way of life, and believing in Karma, re-incarnation, and salvation. He became fascinated by the thought of living as an ascetic, wandering around, and listening to discourses about the highest of the Hindu traditions. This path of knowledge seeking left him wondering whether this was really the true knowledge.

He spent six years in a life of unrelenting self-denial. But the sense of peace, a concomitant of Salvation, still eluded him. Thoroughly debilitated in health, depressed in spirit, and beset by temptations, he rested under a tree near the modern city of Gaya, in the northeastern state of Bihar, India. There and then, as he meditated, a sudden transformation occurred. That was the moment of Enlightenment that he was blessed with. The wisdom that he acquired enabled him to see the cause of suffering in life, rebirth, and the ways and means of becoming liberated from the vicious cycle.

From then onwards, he began to feel an emergent need to be the bearer of a message that would transform innumerable lives. He spent the remainder of his long life, sharing with all his concept of what life could become.

Buddha set in motion, 'The Wheel of the Doctrine', whose crux and core is contained in 'The Four Noble Truths'.

The first noble truth says that life is full of suffering, and that the plane of human-existence is characterized by pain, impermanence, and

dissatisfaction. Man is never completely satisfied. Pleasure leads to pain, youth to old age, health to sickness, and life to death. Every aspect of life is subject to constant change. Realizing that as fact is the essence of understanding.

The second truth is that suffering in life can be attributed to craving, desire, thirst, hunger and temptation. Man, by nature, is a craving creature, striving hard to establish and enhance his image. This is the result of an egotistical mind. Man craves power, prestige, joy, wealth, security and material possessions. He is also tormented by physical cravings and the wish for longevity and eternity (by way of re-incarnation). Man is under the spell of the three intoxicants: sensuality that compels him to love pleasures, ignorance that deludes his thinking into forming and holding onto fallacies and such notions, and craving that makes him pine for re-birth.

The third truth is that craving must be eliminated and extinguished.

And the fourth truth enumerates the Noble eight-fold path that spells out the course of action to be adopted, for achieving victory over the three vices.

The eight-fold path elucidates the various features of righteous-living, thus:

‘Right belief’ and ‘right purpose’ involve the acceptance of the first three truths, and the determination to effect a change for the better.

‘Right speech’ implies avoidance of anger, gossip, and self-aggrandizement.

‘Right conduct’ includes acts of compassion and magnanimity, along with avoidance of quarrelling.

‘Right livelihood’ is living in consonance with Buddhist principals. These are the basic ethical pre-requisites, as virtues commended for householders, and in stricter terms for monks and ascetics.

‘Right effort’, ‘right mindfulness’, and ‘right concentration’ are usually the guidelines meant for monastic living. The imagery of a path carries

with it an image of a destination because all who travel must be fully aware of where their chosen path is leading them to that ultimate goal: Buddhist Salvation, the blissful experience of Nirvana. Anyone arriving at Salvation, attains the title of an Arahant, a saint. He becomes a 'New Being', liberated from the shackles and fetters of ignorance and intoxications of all varieties that stimulate his craving. He is, now, immune to them, and desire has no dominion over him, having lost its seductive power. He is free from the craving for this life and for a possible next life.

The Doctrine and the Path

The context of Buddhist ethics, in its pristine form, is a philosophy of life, man and the world. Buddhist morality is personal, and it is a way of life for the one who aspires to attain Nirvana. The Buddhist concept of Dharma means: 'the universal truth concerning human life'. The doctrine defines 'the truth' about life as: essentially, a suffering or unfulfilled existence, the universality of change and impermanence, about craving and rebirth (that inevitably ensues from craving).

The history of Buddhism extends over two and a half millennia. It has spread into a number of originally unrelated cultures and exercised great influence over most of Asia. All forms of Buddhism, today, originate from the same roots.

Buddhism says that the world operates by natural power and law, not by Divine Command. The existence of God is denied. They deify the Buddha, and also worship other gods.

In Buddhism there is no sin against God.

Purpose of Life

The primary goal of a practicing Buddhist is to attain Nirvana. Before one reaches this lofty level, it is almost as if the person is living a lie. While Buddhism recognizes that any individual person might be able to chart his own course towards Nirvana, the Eightfold Noble Path, the method preached by the Buddha, is viewed as the most direct path to Nirvana. One need not perfect a single area of the eight before proceeding to the next; instead all eight paths are meant to be implemented simultaneously.

Basic Tenets and Theology

One of the most fundamental realities of Buddhism is that it is a religion focused in seeking at the Truth, comprehending it and living according to it. There is absolutely no need for blind faith, dogmas ceremonies, sacraments or following rhetoric. This is because Buddhism transcends simple faith. It is a path to enlightenment. So, one is beckoned to witness the truth for himself. Obviously, this is not an easy journey, but it made with one's own efforts and sweat. One cannot just rely on any and ride his coattails into the next world. Only through one's own efforts, and through taking responsibility for one's own life, can emancipation from the vicissitudes of the physical world and suffering ever transpire.

While Buddhism teaches freedom from suffering, if one does not attain Nirvana or self-enlightenment in this world, then that person will be confined in the fabricated reality in which he wrongly accepts. The person will be re-born life after life until he attains freedom from the circle of rebirths. Furthermore, according to the laws of Karma, the person will experience either a good or bad life in his future reincarnation. All his actions, thoughts, beliefs, cravings, loves, sufferings, emotions, etc., will be taken into account when the natural laws of Karma re-assign the person to their next role in their next life form.

Buddhists believe that the evidence for rebirth based on one's past life experiences can be proven for a simple look at the world today. As some people are born healthy, sick, rich, poor, happy, sad, etc., there is no way to account for such Karma unless there is a cause to such events. Buddhists believe that the cause of such fortune is actions and emotions of our past lives.

As the primary goal of Buddhism is to free one from this constant cycle of birth and re-birth, there must be a way to accomplish this. According to Buddhism, the way is through the total extermination of craving for life or things. These senses are what stay alive in people after they die, and they are what must be destroyed in order to attain Nirvana.

Role of Women and Family

In theory, the Buddhist religion is egalitarian. In fact, the Buddha never differentiated between men and women in his own life. Unfortunately today, Buddhists, in general, do not allow women to join the monastic order.. Similarly, women have a much harder time than monks or lay-men accessing the same the institutional structures that allow them to better themselves towards Nirvana.

The Buddha established eight statutes when the first assembly of women attempted to join the Buddhist order. These rules are still held in high esteem torah within Buddhist circles. Some examples of these rules include:

- Nuns play an inferior role to that of monks even if they are more senior.
- Monks are to instruct nuns and not the other way around.
- Only monks should reprimand their own, not nuns.

Holidays and Festivals

Most Buddhist holidays actually take place on Sunday. So when a date does not coincide with a Sunday, generally, it will be pushed up.

Bodhi Day – According to Mahayanans, this is when the Buddha first taught the Four Noble Truths to his followers. It generally falls out on December 8th.

Nirvana Day – According to Mahayanans, this is the day that Shakyamuni Buddha died. It is observed on the 2nd Sunday of February.

Wesak – This day commemorates the Buddha's birth. It occurs before April 8.

O-Bon – This two day-period is one of remembrance commemorating all the people that have past away during the past year.

O-Higan – This holiday actually is connected with the seasons. It takes place right before the equinox or actually on it. At this time of year, the temperature changes drastically to more mild temperatures. Accordingly, Buddhists take this time period as one which symbolizes the transmission from ephemerality to enlightenment.

Christianity

SYMBOL OF CHRISTIANITY



The Cross

The Cross is the symbol of the resurrection of Jesus, His crucifixion and the Christian's hope for life after death.

CHRISTIAN PRAYER

Prayer of St. Francis

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace;

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

Where there is injury, pardon;

Where there is doubt, faith;

Where there is darkness, light;

Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be

consoled as to console;

to be understood as to understand;

to be loved as to love.

For, it is in giving that we receive;

it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

it is in dying that we are born to eternal life,

AMEN.

Christianity
St. Patrick's Cathedral, NY



CHRISTIANITY

at a glance

Approximately 30-33 A.D., Christianity was founded by Jesus Christ, in the Judean province of Palestine (modern-day state of Israel), which was a part of the Roman Empire at that time. The Bible is the Holy Book which includes the Old Testament, written originally in Hebrew and Aramaic, and the New Testament written in Koine Greek).

The focus in Christianity is on Jesus of Nazareth, born of Virgin Mother Mary, as a Divine gift. He proclaimed the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God on earth. He was a religious teacher in the Jewish tradition as both his parents were Jews. Roman authorities crucified Jesus after He led a preaching career that lasted a mere three years, (approximately 29 C.E.). Some Jews framed charges against Him, as they were growing apprehensive about His claims pertaining to being God's Son, the promised Messiah and feared His teachings might trigger an insurrection which would be, eventually, suppressed by the mighty Roman Empire. This was not acceptable to the Jews as it would have eroded the little remaining power and influence.

Christ's disciples, all of whom had deserted him at his arrest, later rallied around him, and asserted that he had been raised from the grave. They testified that this symbolized, and demonstrated that He was not only the Messiah, but also the one sent by God to bring spiritual salvation to the whole of humanity. Within twenty years, this message was preached to non-Jews, and the new religion based on it was spreading westwards throughout the Roman Empire.

Gradually, the Jewish heritage was replaced by beliefs, practices, and a church order that owed much to Greco-Roman culture, to which most Christians now belonged. Terms like 'Son of God,' or 'Lord' became more popular descriptions of Jesus.

As Christianity moved further away from its parent Judaism, it began to imbibe the anti-semitism of the Roman world. Jews came to be called 'Christ killers', and for about sixteen centuries, they were persecuted and subjected to various forms of discrimination, culminating in the great Holocaust of the 20th century.

In 313 A.D., Emperor Constantine legalized the Christian religion, paving the path for it to be recognized as the State religion of the Empire by the end of the century. Attempts were made to identify and codify the Christian beliefs at Church Councils and through such formalities as the Nicene Creed.

As the concept of Christendom developed, the church and the state began combining to create into a cohesive unit, based and ruled on Christian principles. Although they achieved some degree of harmony under the authority of the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, no form of political unity or cohesion could be arrived at.

The eastern churches rejected the supremacy of the Pope in 1054 A.D., but the most serious challenge to the remaining unity of Christendom came in the sixteenth century, when a number of people known as reformers or protestors, pioneered by a German monk, Martin Luther, questioned the Pope's authority.

Luther's study of the Bible convinced them that the medieval church had developed a momentum of its own, often contrary to Scripture, and was in need of reform. The result of Luther's protestations was many splinter groups.

For centuries, these reformed or Protestant churches existed as rivals, but during the twentieth century, a spirit of ecumenism developed, resulting in harmony, cooperation and sometimes even in structural unity.

Many Christian groups are particularly active in missionary work. They place the power of the Holy Spirit and their understanding of Christian truth above ecumenical concerns, but many regard the Pope as 'anti-Christ'. Among these are Evangelicals and Pentecostals. Other movements, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Latter Day Saints (the Mormons), are often considered to be outside the limits of Christianity by many major denominations.

Christian worship varies from one denomination to another. It is always congregational, but the focus may be on the exposition of the Bible, or on the Last Supper, that Jesus shared with his disciples, on the night preceding his martyrdom.

Not surprisingly, ethics featured prominently in the teachings of Jesus, for they were integral and important aspect of his heritage. He often clashed with his co-religionists over the interpretations of the ethical teachings in the Torah. He did not give his followers many particular precepts, but invited them to base their attitudes on the principle of love for God, and love for one's fellow human beings. Christians define 'love' in terms of Christ's own personal example. He is their role model.

Once Constantine became Emperor, Christians enjoyed favored political status and power, enabling them to influence governmental policies and programmes.

In matters of personal morality, Christians would agree that theft, murder, and adultery are wrong. With regard to issues, such as the determination of punishment to be meted out to criminals, pacifism, abortion, euthanasia, and regarding many other issues including cohabiting in a stable relationship outside marriage, many opposing views have emerged, in recent centuries.

There is also considerable debate as to whether Christians should use any power they may possess to impose their beliefs in these matters on others, by way of exercising influence on politicians and the like. In some parts

of the world, there exist Christian political parties, and other pressure groups and caucuses. On the other side are those who find it impossible to endorse any political world-order as being Christian; they are critical of all regimes and parties.

The One God is Triune: He is present in three persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. God is a spiritual being, without a physical body. He is personal, and is involved with His people's lives. He created the Universe out of nothing, and He is eternal, formless, loving and perfect. Change does not have an effect on Him.

Jesus is God, the second persona in the Trinity. He is God, and man, simultaneously. He was begotten through the Holy Spirit, and was born of Virgin Mary. As per God's plan, Jesus died on the Cross, as payment for the sins committed by mankind. On the third day after His execution, He was resurrected, and was witnessed by many as having taken meals. His wounds were touched, and then He ascended to Heaven, physically. Jesus shall return to the earth, during the end of the world, and shall establish God's kingdom, and judge the world.

The term 'Christian' was first used in Antioch in Syria, in c.35-40 C.E., to designate a new religious community there, which included Jewish and non-Jewish adherents. It was marked by an interesting vestigial link with Judaism; the name 'Christian', derived from 'Christo', the Greek translation of the Hebrew word for Messiah: 'Christos' (Acts 2:26); this word was used by Jews to designate their anticipated national savior. In this case, it was applied to the prophet-teacher Jesus of Nazareth, executed in Judea, where the movement had originated, a few years earlier.

The sobriquet 'Christian' stuck as the movement further evolved, and spread. Christianity has appeared in a profusion of different forms and expressions, but allegiance to Christ is crucial to all. It is also appropriate that the word used to identify Christians is a Jewish technical term, as the roots of the movement lie deep in the life and teachings of ancient Israel, and significantly it is a Jewish term, translated into Greek. The multitudinous forms in which Christianity appears are conditioned by

cultural and linguistic factors, so that translatability and transmission across cultural frontiers are some of the leading characteristics of Christianity as a faith.

The Jewish Scriptures - The earliest Christians were Jews, well read in the scriptures of Israel, which traditionally subsisted in three categories, namely, the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Although Christianity soon developed as an overwhelmingly Gentile movement, the Christian communities continued to read the Jewish scriptures, to relate these to Christ, and to use them as an authoritative source for teaching and debate. By this means the Jewish scriptures came to be designated by the Christians as the Old Testament or Covenant, representing a stage of the divine dealings with humanity prior to the advent of Christ.

The New Testament Writings - For the life and work of Jesus, 'the Christ', the collection of early Christian writings known as the New Testament is the crucial early source. This consists of four accounts of the ministry and teaching of Jesus, called the Gospels; a supplement to the third of the Gospels, describing the early teachings of Jesus in Jerusalem and the wider Mediterranean world, are called Acts of the Apostles; a collection of letters, called the Epistles, mostly to Congregations and a few to individuals, many of which bear the name of Paul; and a work which combines several more letters with prophecies and interpretation of the history, the Apocalypse or Revelation of John.

These writings reflect the ideas and images of Jesus held in the early Christian communities, and indeed brought these communities into being, as well as giving accounts of His teachings. The special status of the New Testament writings originally derived from their association in some way with the group of followers of Jesus, known as the Apostles, who were chosen by Jesus Himself. While still living, they were recognized as the founders and regulators of the Christian community, in the sense that their interpretation of His person and teachings was regarded as authoritative.

For a short but vital period during the Judaic phase (c.30-70 C.E.) Christianity was entirely Jewish in composition and mode of life. To a

contemporary observer, the early Christian community described in the opening chapters of the Acts of the Apostles would have appeared to be one more of the seemingly infinite variations of Judaism. All its members were Jews by birth or inheritance. Their regular meeting-place was the Temple in Jerusalem, symbolic center of the nation's worship.

However, there were some distinctive features of the early Christian community's life and beliefs which were expressed in terms of the scriptures of Israel, and the Jewish experience and aspirations. The Apostles, the chosen associates of Jesus, were the principal witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection was the irrefutable crowning evidence that He was the divinely appointed Messiah, the promised savior of the nation. The prophetic writings indicated that the Age to come would dawn with the arrival of the Messiah, which era had, therefore, now begun, opening the way to the moral renewal of the nation as People of God.

Christians believe that through Jesus, people might now be forgiven their past sins and shortcomings, and become the blessed recipients of an overflow of Divine Presence and energy, the Holy Spirit, as all the Scriptures indicated.

Group worship, usually in the Church, is performed sans any secret rites and rituals. Baptism and the Lord's Supper (Communion) are the salient features. Active voluntary missionary efforts are encouraged by the faith.

Christians believe that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, promised to Israel, in the Old Testament.

Eastern Christianity has a long history of persecution and disability. In the early days, Christians in the eastern Mediterranean bore the fiercest attacks of the pagan Roman state, a memory kept alive by the assiduous veneration of the martyrs. Over the long centuries of Muslim rule, every inducement was given to convert from the faith. Attrition became the norm, survival the goal, and fierce attachment to a glorious past, the

means. Russian Christians, spared Turkish over-rule, generally thought of themselves as the defenders of their persecuted brethren; but, under Soviet rule, they, too, were known to bear persecution of varying degrees of ferocity. To its adherents, therefore, Eastern Christianity is, simply, Christianity; their Church is not a denomination, but the Universal and Orthodox Church.

Christianity is in unanimous agreement with other religions, while advising the adherents, on a wide gamut of issues, and while suggesting remedies to the multifarious problems that afflict all mankind, in general, irrespective of religious affiliations.

Sanctification

Christians believe that sanctification is achieved by God's grace, and not due to noble deeds of man, and it must be received by deep faith. After death, all those who are saved by Jesus live eternally, with Jesus, and the others choose to Hell.

Sin

"Addictions lead to Sin and Evil leads to Suffering" is the 'creed' of all the religions. Addiction of all hues and colors is forbidden, strictly, whether it is adultery, gambling, or drug-intake or alcoholism. Exploitation of the weaker sections of the society, for satiating one's lust for carnal-instincts, power and wealth, is, also, another variety of addiction.

About the sin of adultery, Christianity says: "A bastard shall not enter the congregation of the Lord"; no mention is made of the sinful act of the 'bastard' parents.

Purpose-of-Life

The ideal purpose-of-life has been enunciated as: “Service to Humanity is Service to God”. All craving after desires and materialistic pleasures has been relegated to a secondary position, while awarding the “superior” status to God-realization, through a daily-routine of prayer and meditation that is instrumental in ridding the aspirant of the various evils. Christianity sees sin as a real act of rebellion against the Only Perfect One (God).

Role of Women and Family

In Genesis, the Old Testament says that God created woman (Eve) from a portion of Adam’s rib, so that man would always remember that his mate must stand at his side as an equal, neither higher nor lower.

Regarding marital relationships:

“It is well for a man not to touch a woman. But because of the temptation to immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does. Do not refuse one another except perhaps by agreement for a season, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come back together again, lest Satan tempt you through lack of self-control.

To the unmarried and the widows, I say that it is well for them to remain single as I do. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.” (Corinthians 7: 1-9)

Regarding adultery:

“Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled; for God will judge the immoral and the adulterous.” (Hebrews 13:4)

Regarding equality:

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28)

Ceremonies, Rituals & Sacraments

Christianity gives prominence to the sacraments. The Roman Catholic Church recognizes seven of them. Nearly all Christians consider two of these as obligatory. They are: the sacrament of Baptism and the sacrament of Eucharist.

The first deals with the initiation and purification ceremonies, and the second is the symbol of eternal sacrifice. The first is performed once in a lifetime, and the second is performed daily. Water is used in the former, while bread and wine in the latter. The bread, given as ‘strength’ to the believer, is symbolic of Christ’s body, and wine represents Christ’s blood, that was, once, poured out on Calvary, and now given for our ‘sanctification’. While taking both these articles, the worshipper is supposed to inherit the nature and life of Christ, thus becoming one with Him. The sacrament of marriage includes the exchange of marriage-vows, as well as of finger-rings, and is performed in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The ‘day of judgment’ is an important doctrine in Christianity.

Miracles

John Locke, the great Oxford philosopher and Christian thinker (1632) said in his celebrated book ‘Reasonableness of Christianity’, that the proof of the authentic nature of Christianity is the presence of the ‘element of supernatural’ in it: i.e., a supernatural virgin birth; a supernatural resurrection; and, a supernatural series of miracles, beginning from Christ, down through the centuries. Miracles at the famous ‘Lourdes Shrine’ are well known. Hundreds of these have not only been documented at the Vatican, but also have been testified about by a verification process.

In the Holy Bible, there is mention of ‘sea-dividing’ (Josh 3:9-17), the ‘sun standing still’ (Josh 10:12-14), ‘man disappearing into the sky in a chariot of fire’ (II Kings 2:11), serpents (in Gen. 3:1-40) and asses (in Num. 22:28-30) ‘talking as humans’, ‘axe-heads that float’ (II Kings 6:4-7) and Jonah ‘surviving in the stomach of a whale’ (Jonah 1:17) and in a worm eaten gourd (Jon 3:6-7).

Jesus performed miracles, which are supposed to have become the mainstay of his divinity. He cured a leper (Matthew 8:3), cast out the devil from a Greek girl (Mark 7:25-30), cured a blind man (Mark 9: 2-10), turned water into wine (John 2;1-11), fed one man’s food to thousands (Mark 6:30-44), spoke to the wind and the waves (Mark 4:35-41), made a crippled person walk (John 5:1-9) and resurrected the dead to life (John 11:38-44). It was on the basis of his miracles of Tetra (wonders), Dunameis (mighty acts) and Semeia (signs) that in 451 A.D., the Council of Chalcedon declared Jesus as “God in human form”.

But, we also find that similar miracles have, also, been performed by other Christian and Jewish Prophets, and yet they are not considered as great as Christ. For instance, Elisha fed 100 people with only 20 barley loafs (II Kings 4:44), cured Naaman of leprosy (II Kings 5:14), and cured a blind young man (II Kings 16-17). Ravens brought bread and flesh to Elijah (I Kings 17:16). Elijah raised a child from the dead (I Kings 17:22, II Kings 13:21, II Kings 4:34).

Although Christians attach great significance to Christ’s miracles, Jesus, Himself, is said to have admitted that miracles can be performed by non-Christians, disbelievers, and false Prophets. In Matthew 24:24, He says: “For there shall be false Christs and false Prophets and shall show signs and wonders”.

Even retention of hair has been illustrated as having great and miraculous source of power, according to the following Biblical quotes, hitherto not highlighted in the Christian world. Details of Samson’s birth and the miraculous powers of hair have been given in the Chapter on Miracle. During a battle, in which Samson killed thousands, single-handedly, “Samson was tired and weary, but God sent water gushing from a rock. Samson drank some and felt strong again”. He called it the ‘Caller-Spring’ or ‘Enhakkore’. It is located at Jawbone, in Israel (Judges 15: 19).

Festivals :

The following are the significant days in Christianity:

December 8 is celebrated as the Day of Immaculate Conception, when Jesus was said to have been conceived.

December 25 is Christmas, celebrating the birth of Jesus.

Holy Thursday is celebrated in reminiscence of the night, prior to the Crucifixion, when Jesus partook of the Last Supper with his disciples, and is said to have pardoned the traitors, who backstabbed him.

Good Friday is when Jesus was nailed on The Cross; it is 'Good' because he died to redeem all the sinners.

Easter, in April, is the day of resurrection, when Christ is believed to have risen from his grave, where he rested for three days after his crucifixion.

Teachings of Jesus Christ

"Never man spake like this man" with such authority (John 7:46; compare Matt. 7:29). His teachings were about "the Father," what He wanted, what He was like, what He would do for His creation. Jesus' teachings required absolute obedience and love for God and acknowledgement of the kingdom of God. He dared claim that the kingdom had begun in His ministry but would not be culminated until Christ's final coming. Until that coming, Christians were to live in the world by the ethical injunctions He gave (Matt. 5-7) and in the kind of love He had shown and commanded (John 14-16). To help earthly people understand heavenly things, He spoke in parables. These parables were from realistic, real-life settings. They were about the kingdom of God, what it was like, what was required to live in it, what was the meaning of life according to its teachings, what the kingdom promised. One of the promises of the kingdom was that the King would return and rule in it.

Summary

Christians believe that Christ is the only way to access God. The Apostles and Early Church Fathers assumed that Jesus' life was meant to set the paradigm for how one should live his own life. Through Jesus' amazingly unselfish ways, he was able to bring salvation to the whole world. Through his sacrifice on the cross, these Christians. In fact, the functional

way in which the New Testament portrays Him is found in the statement that: “He was a man who went about doing good” (Acts 10:38) for that was His very essence. One must take into consideration the good he did in the face of all the evil that is in the world. With one wholeheartedly selfless act, he set the stage for all the rest of human history. In fact, God responded in kind by raising Jesus from the dead.

Glancing toward the future, one might say that the concerns of Christians will be mainly related to their relations with other Christians belonging to several denominations, the environment, racism, and the ministry of women, attitudes towards and relations with adherents of other Faiths. This is primarily a Western agenda; Christians in Asia and Africa have different perspectives.

Christianity’s house of worship, the church, is decorated according to denomination and local taste. The central point in the prayer room is the altar or communion table. Pews are provided for the congregation and there usually may also be a baptismal font or pulpit. Most services are held Saturday evening or Sundays and last about an hour or more. They are conducted by a minister, pastor, priest or deacon and follow a formal liturgy with some informational elements. Sermons are based on Bible or New Testament readings and address current issues. Christians celebrate Holy Communion, the sharing of bread and wine in memory of Jesus Christ. Visitors are welcome; there are no demands.

Hinduism

SYMBOL OF HINDUISM



The Om

The symbol Om represents supreme God and its origin is from the Vedas.

HINDU PRAYER

From the *Rig Vega*

*May the wind blow sweetness,
the rivers flow sweetness,
the herbs grow sweetness,
for the People of Truth!*

*Sweet be the night,
sweet the dawn,
sweet be earth's fragrance,
sweet be our Heaven!*

*May the tree afford us sweetness,
the sun shine sweetness,
our cows yield sweetness-
milk in plenty!*

Hindu Temple



HINDUISM

at a glance

Hinduism consists of innumerable sects and sub-sects and began between 1,800-1,000 B.C., in the ancient land of India.

There is no single founder who can be credited with starting this religion which commands one of the largest followings in the world.

Many writings, including the Vedas (1,000 B.C.), the Upanishads, and the Bhagavada-Gita are some of the countless Scriptures of Hinduism.

Hindus believe that meditation, prayer, yoga and charity could lead one towards salvation, which might take several lifetimes. Chanting of hymns, idol-worship, bathing in rivers, fasting, and a variety of other secret rites and ritualistic ceremonies are a distinct feature of Hinduism.

Hinduism is the name given to the complex religious traditions that are said to have evolved, organically, over several thousand years on the Indian sub-continent in Asia. Represented, today by over 700 million adherents to the faith, Hinduism is observed all over the world. Apart from communities residing in neighboring countries like Nepal, Sri Lanka, Burma, Tibet, Bangladesh, Bali, the Caribbean, and those in Southwest Africa, Europe and the Americas, the majority of Hindus reside in India. The Hindus in India constitute 4/5ths of the total populace. Within Hinduism, there are so many diverse sects, that it would be really onerous to describe them all.

The term 'Hindu' is Persian for Indian. The land of India has become crucial to, and almost synonymous with, Hinduism. The holy sites related to the religion are great pilgrimage centers, and have become revered landmarks on the geographical terrain of the vast land known as India. The ritualistic ceremonies are an inseparable part of the Hindu heritage and lifestyle. There are two principal reasons for regarding Hinduism as an evolving religious tradition, rather than as a singularly separate religion, in the form and sense that is usually understood. The first reason is that Hinduism displays very few of the obvious characteristics that have

generally come to be associated with the definition of a 'religion'. For instance, it has no single founder. Nor is it a prophetic religion. There is no particular dogma, doctrine or practice that can be said to form an integral feature of Hinduism. It is not a theological entity, nor does it have a single moral code-of-ethics. And, most significantly, there is no specific scripture that is to be followed.

Hinduism is not sustained by an ecclesiastical organization. Thus, it is difficult to categorize it as a religion, employing normally acceptable criteria.

The second reason comes from the extraordinary diversity, both historically, as well as in the contemporary situation. Such diversity is rarely surprising when we remember that Hinduism refers to the mainstream of religious development occurring on a huge sub-continent, over a span of several thousand years, during which time it was subjected to innumerable intrusions by alien races and cultures.

The sub-continent is not only vast, but it is also marked by considerable regional variation. Regions differ from one another in terms of terrain, climate, natural resources, modes of transportation, communication, as well as ethnographically, owing to the varied ethnic, cultural and linguistic groupings that inhabit them.

Diversity is, therefore, to be noticed in all domains and spheres. Hinduism evolved, organically, with new initiatives and developments taking place within the traditional framework, as well as by way of interaction with, and adjustment to, other traditions and cults, which merged and assimilated eventually into the Hindu fold. These two processes of evolution and assimilation have been instrumental in producing a variety of religious systems, beliefs and practices.

At one end of the scale are numerous small and unsophisticated local cults, practiced by, perhaps, only two or three village-units. At the other extreme are the major religious movements, which have adherents numbering in the millions across the sub-continent. Such massive groups have their own well-defined ideologies, theologies/mythologies and coded rituals as the foundations upon which to raise the solid structure of the religion. These could, justifiably, be accorded the status of a 'religion' in their own right. There are quite a few groups, whose respective

viewpoints regarding faith have nothing in common, but are all considered to be Hindus.

Confronted with such diversity, what is it that makes Hinduism a single religious-tradition, and not a loosely knit confederation of many different traditions? The answer could include, among a host of other factors, such important ones as: historical continuity, a strong and unifying sense of a shared heritage, and a family-like relationship between the various factions.

All of these factors apply equally to Buddhism and Jainism as well, both of which arose from within Hinduism, but separated, from its fold, to become independent religions. Sikhism sprang up as a direct revelation of God to Guru Nanak who was born of a Hindu family. However, the crucial point here is that even though Hindus emphasize that these three are very much a part and parcel of Hinduism, and not distinct religions, in reality, they are completely independent religions. For example, the founder of the Sikh religion, Guru Nanak, rejected all ritual practices and traditions which followed Hinduism. The only common factor was that the founders of these different religions were born in Hindu families.

Whatever its seeds, Hindu self-awareness certainly encountered quite an early confrontation with the Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs, and acquired greater potency when it came face-to-face with Islam. In recent times, it has gained immense strength as a result of the nationalistic-fervor and search for political-identity. All of these factors give Hinduism the shape and color of one of the important living-religions.

Approaches to Hinduism

The first attested usage of the word 'Hinduism' in the English language, was noticed as late as 1829. However, this is not to say that the beliefs and practices of the Hindus had not been previously studied in this language.

The symbol of 'Om' is an ardent expression of the existence of an Omnipresent Force/Power. This sound is frequently employed as a meditational technique, known as 'Yoga'.

Enjoying the same status as the Papal-authority in Christianity, there are four religious-heads in Hinduism: the 'Shankaracharyas', who command utmost reverence. They have their seats in the four geographic zones of India. The Upanishads contain the gist of the deepest 'Inner-self-experiences, of the wisest people that lived in India, between 800-400 B.C. These were no ordinary words of preaching, nor any other theological-doctrine, but their life's essence. However, later, 'Vedanta' was to become the comprehensive philosophical-reservoir, based primarily, on the 'Upanishads'. Salvation

Prayer and contemplative meditation, as per the Rig-Veda, is the twin-path towards redemption.

According to Hindu-thought, people whose conduct has been one that may be termed exemplary, shall be rewarded and honored, in the next birth as a warrior, priest or merchant, thereby attaining bravery, power, knowledge and wealth. Those who committed misdeeds or acts of commission or omission shall be condemned to continue languishing, in the 'hell' of re-incarnation, migrating into lowest levels of existence. This is explained, in great detail, as the Law-of-Karma (action or deed).

To attain Salvation, three alternate routes have been prescribed:

- 1) Way of Knowledge: the Intellectual approach.
 - 2) The Emotional Path of Devotion.
- The Practical Life of Karma.

According to Hindu belief, the four-layered caste-structure is a Divinely devised design, and a schematic plan for man to lead his life in consonance with in order to attain happiness and liberation.

Apart from God and the deities, a cosmic-power of Karma exists.

Hinduism regards God as a Loving-Supreme Guide, a Father, residing within each heart and soul. This is the relationship between the Primeval-Soul (Parmatma) and Soul (Atma). He is smaller than the grain of rice, even smaller than a miniscule particle of dust; and yet greater than the

earth, expansive than the oceans: the Supreme of all the ethereal and nether worlds, the planets, and the constellations and the galaxies.

The Caste-System

The caste system is one of the most definitive features of this religion. There are four major caste-blocks, in successively descending order. Brahmins, the priests or clergy, are the intellectual-class, placed on the highest pedestal. Kshatriyas, the elite-warriors and monarchs, comprise the next class. Vaish or the merchants/traders, are third in the hierarchy. And at the bottom of the hierarchy come the Shudras (the low-castes, out-castes and untouchables, who are condemned to perform menial-tasks, like cobblers, butchers, sweepers and barbers etc.).

An irony of sorts is to be witnessed in the basic Hindu belief structure: while great emphasis has been laid upon the existence of One Supreme-Being, there is no reference to Pantheism in any Hindu Scripture. A great deal of flexibility has been accorded to the adherents, whose beliefs are, often, at variance, with one another, while all profess themselves to be Hindus. This has resulted in a feeling of tolerant coexistence and harmony.

Mysticism has always been an inseparable part of this religion. But, the caste-system negates this very concept, thus striking at its very roots, in so much as it segregates one human from another, on hereditary-basis. 'Tolerance' is not shown towards the low-castes.

As per the social-code edified in Manu Smritee (King Manu's Memoirs), the Brahmin was 'born' from the mouth of the Primeval-Being, hence he enjoys the highest social status. The Kshatriya was the second-in-command, having been 'born' of the arms. The next was the Vaish, who was born from the thighs. And the poor Shudra, born from the feet, was presented the 'award' of leading a miserable life, because he was condemned, by the higher castes, to have been 'born' from the feet.

There is no sin greater than the violation of this caste-structure or system, and such a violation entails the severest penalization, in the form of continual trans-migration. There is to be an unquestionable compliance with hereditary conventions and ceremonies, rites and rituals.

Life and the world have been termed as ‘illusionary’ (Maya) concepts.

A person is considered to be a Hindu, by virtue of his birth in a Hindu household.

Hindu Gods and Goddesses

Hinduism is probably the only religion without even one formalized dogma. As each day passes, the religion changes a little bit. Each tradition and story is told a bit differently. Nonetheless, some of the gods represent concretized notions within Hinduism. All the Hindu gods have a physical representation, an image, in order to assist humankind in its apprehension of very complex, abstract ideas. This is true about all the gods save one: Om, the spirit, Brahman. He is the top of the food chain of the Hindu gods. He is the One. In the following we will enumerate some of the other gods.

Shiva - This god symbolizes the always changing world around us: how nothing ever stays the same. While Shiva is generally viewed as a destroyer, technically, He is also a creator, for the only reason that He destroys is to make room for creation. In Hinduism, creatio and destruction go hand in hand. In statues and pictures, Shiva will appear either dancing or meditating. The reason that Shiva is depicted as dancing is because dance symbolizes the ever-changing world around us in that dance produces rhythms and movements.

Vishnu – This god fills in the triad: Brahman is on top, with Shiva and Vishnu right under. As opposed to Shiva, Vishnu is the preserver of the world; the god that ensures constancy, goodness and mercy. Paralleling the void and nothingness that existed before creation in the Judeo-Christian traditions, Vishnu is the only thing that was around before the universe’s creation.

Ganesh - The god is Shiva’s son. In pictures and sculptures, it is usually depicted as the god with the head of an elephant. This god symbolized intelligence and strength and hence Hindus will pray towards Him when they need to rise above an obstruction. Furthermore, Ganesh represents good luck and initial stages. Not only is he a popular gift for good times and bad, He is also the inspiration for writers.

There are several sub-gods that rest under the triad. Durga – This is Shiva's female aspect. She was created in order to destroy demons. Kali – This is Shiva's female side; she is the factor that destroys. Lakshmi - This is Vishnu's wife or consort, the goddess of affluence and success. Sarasvati – This is goddess of arts and learning.

Practices Concerning Women

Sati – is the practice of self-immolation, resorted to by a widow at the time of her husband's death. If she failed to 'volunteer' to jump onto her deceased husband's pyre, she would be flung onto it by her family and community. All of this takes place with full religious and legal sanction from the King, who was revered as the Divine-representative.

Widow remarriage - was a taboo subject. With the passage of time, conditions improved, whereby a widow 'could live', but would have to live the rest of her life as a dependent on her family, without any say, even in decisions pertaining to her own children.

Devadaasis – is the most despicable form of prostitution. It was encouraged in the temples, where young teenagers would be 'donated' by their families as a penance or ritual to appease God. They were 'adopted' legally by the Temple, but were actually the means for fulfilling the carnal desires of the priests. They were never permitted to marry anyone, and were condemned to spend their life thus.

Holidays and Festivals

Hindu New Year – Like many other religions, the New Year marks a time of re-creation and new beginnings. As it occurs at the close of the winter, it also is meant to be a celebration of the world re-awakening after its long sleep.

Vishu – While this holiday's name is also the name of one of the gods among the Hindu triad, the rites and rituals of this holiday are meant to escort the New Year in. This is why it occurs on the first day of Medam.

Ugadi Like the last two holidays, Ugadi also has to do with the New Year. It is a time when people come together to chant mantras, while others attempt to predict what the New Year will bring.

Islam

SYMBOL OF ISLAM



The symbol of Islam is the crescent and star, which reflect the start of each of the 12 lunar months.

ISLAMIC PRAYER

In the name of Allah, the most gracious and merciful, O Mohammed, narrate something from Abraham's story.

Behold, he said, to his Father and his people; it is my Lord who has created me, and it is He who guides me;

Who gives me food and drink; and when I am ill, it is He who cures me;

Who will cause me to die, and to live again; And, who, I do hope, will forgive me my faults, on the day of judgment.

Oh my Lord, bestow wisdom on me, and join me with the righteous; Grant me honorable mention on the tongue of truth among the later generations;

The day when neither wealth nor sons will avail, but only He will prosper that brings to Allah a sound heart: For Allah has spoken the truth.

Mosque
in Washington D.C., United States



ISLAM

at a glance

Islam was founded about 610 A.D., in Mecca-Medina, Saudi Arabia, by the Prophet Mohammed. The major sects are Sunni and Shi'ite. The Koran is the Scripture written in Arabic, and the Hadith (Mohammed's words and works), are also revered, at par with the Koran by some sects. God is One, and He is said to have revealed the Koran to Mohammed through the means of the angel Gabriel. God is depicted both as a harsh judge and as merciful king.

Jesus is accepted as one of some 124,000 prophets sent by God, to select societies. The prophets of the Old Testament, along with Mohammed, are considered the greatest of all known prophets. The Koran views Jesus as the Spirit of God and Gabriel as the Holy Spirit.

Islam believes that human beings are generally deemed to be good, noble and worthy, but fallible, requiring guidance. The God's arbitrary mercy may tilt the balance, if one begs for it. Usually, paradise awaits the noble ones, and hell opens its doors for the slanderers.

Resurrection is accepted as a way of life and death. On the day of final reckoning, eternal paradise beckons the believers of Islam, while the infidels go to hell.

Belief in One God, Mohammed as His Prophet, fasting during the month of Ramadan, pilgrimage to Mecca, five daily prayers and almsgiving are the pillars of Islam. Going to the mosque, a Muslim may offer prayers, seek counsel from the clergy, or hear sermons and discourses.

Scripture

Early parts of the Qur'an (Koran) are striking for its lack of statements about the existence of God, deities, and spirits. By collecting divine epithets in the Qur'an, Muslims compiled varying lists of the Ninety-Nine Names of God. The broad lines of the origins and early development of the Islamic traditional institution of almsgiving during Muhammad's lifetime are fairly clear. Qur'an stresses the sharing of wealth with the poor as a pious act.

Basic Tenets and Theology

As early as its inception, the Islamic faith was split. Immediately upon Mohammed's death, the religion bifurcated into two groups. As political and consanguineous considerations were generally placed in front of theological considerations, it was quite a tumultuous time for the nascent religion. The beginning periods of Islamic thought was an exhilarating breeding ground for ideas that culminated in the later-day established Sunni orthodoxy.

The Traditionalists based their faith and practice strictly on the teachings of the Prophet, and were suspicious of the use of "reasoning", in ascertaining religious truth. They rallied round Ahmad Hanbal, who defended the concept of the eternity of the Qur'an, as God's own Word, and argued for a literal interpretation of the Qur'an, including its vivid descriptions of creation and afterlife.

Within the first 100 years of the religion, mystical notions began to appear within Islamic thought. Forms of ascetic pietism arose within the Muslim community. The growing emphasis on the need for obedience to Divine Law within official Islam was another factor leading Muslim mystics and ascetics who became popularly known as the Sufis. They developed "stages of piety" in which the Sufi mystic would walk up the stages toward mystical perfection. The "stages" are similar to those of the medieval Christian monks, while the "states" are identical to those in Hindu and Buddhist concepts. The Sufi emphasis on this twin path of spirituality led to a doctrine of annihilation, of the individual in God. The idea that there are various levels of piety in Islam, and that only a few of the "so-called elite" can reach the highest exalted status eventually led to

the idea of Islamic sainthood in which the saint could actually execute miracles.

The Sufi tradition within Islam also stands out for its distinctive practices. While traditional Sunni and Shiite Muslims frown upon any usage of music in religious rituals, Sufi orders throughout the Islamic world, particularly in Turkey, Iran, and the Indo-Pakistan region have created many ritualistic ceremonies involving song, play the drums and the use of many other musical vehicles such as dance. For example, music is used in ritual processions, often commemorating the birthday of the Founder of the Order.

Indigenous Islamic reform or revivalist movements in India began as early as the seventeenth century. After a period during which Sufis enjoyed widespread popularity and significant influence in the Indian subcontinent where they were responsible for large-scale conversions of Hindus to Islam, traditional Muslims found a champion in Ahmad Sirhindi, who attacked certain philosophical planks of the Sufis, while retaining certain other Sufi views and techniques.

The Five Pillars of Islam

The most basic aspect of Islamic praxis are the Five Pillars. They are (1) creed, (2) prayer, (3) charity, (4) fasting and (5) pilgrimage. All Muslims must accept these five pillars and live their life according to them. In the following, we will go into each one in more detail.

1) The Testimony of Faith (the Shahadah): It is the most important of the Five Pillars. One must say: “Lailaha illa Allah, Muhammadur rasoolu Allah.” This means that “There is no god but God (Allah), and Muhammad is his Messenger (Prophet) of God.” While Islam is a monotheistic religion, it rejects the notion that other gods may be worshipped. When one utters this creed with belief, it makes one into a Muslim. It is enough to convert a person.

2) Prayer (Salat): Muslims pray five times daily: once before dawn, at noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and a last time at nighttime. Prayer is directed towards God, without the need for any intermediaries or angel. Before the prayer takes place, the

practitioner, is, generally, expected to follow some purification rituals. The prayers do not take more than a few minutes. As Muslims may pray in almost any area, they can be found praying at work, school and in public.

3) Giving charity (zakat; supporting the disadvantaged and poor): Technically, word 'zakat' can be translated as both 'growth' and 'purification.' As Mohammed tried to institute not only a theological revolution, but also a sociological one, he instituted zakat as part of his vision for social reform. Accordingly, he made charity a religious obligation. As opposed to usual taxation, zakat taxes 2.5 percent of everything that one owns. Depending on the country in which one lives, the zakat might be collected by the government.

4) Fasting during the month of Ramadan (Sawm) : During the ninth month of Muslim calendar, Ramadan, all Muslims must fast from dawn until sundown. This fact is not only one that obligates the practitioner to abstain from food and drink, but also from tobacco and sexual relations. Of course, exceptions could be made for pregnant women, the sick or even travelers. The primary goal of the fast is to inculcate within the Muslim populace self-discipline and to foster care for the poor who always feel hungry. At the close of each fast day, the Muslim people come together to break the fast through a large celebratory meal.

5) The Pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj): This Muslim rite was actually already practiced by Arabic people before Mohammed was even born. It is an annual pilgrimage to Mecca in the twelfth month of the Muslim calendar. All Muslims, both men and women are obligated to travel to Mecca for Hajj at least once in their lifetime. Before the invention of the plane, about 30,000 people went a year, but now, roughly two million pilgrims arrive in Mecca every year for Hajj.

Jihad

The word itself is a derivative of Arabic root meaning “strive” or “make an effort.” It has many connotations ranging from a personal spiritual fight to physical battle in the name of Islamic justice.

In medieval times, there were many rules associated with the notion of jihad. For example, unless the religious leader authorized a battle, then that battle was led by an imam, then the war was not a valid law. There were many rules in regards to how to deal with enemy combatants. First, before entering the war-field, the enemy was to be warned. Next, after the warning they should choose not to accept Islam and not to fight, then they would be offered a protected (dhimmi) status. When a group gained dhimmi status, even though they were below their Muslim counterparts on the social food chain, they still retained certain rights as long as they accepted their Islamic rulers and paid the appropriate taxes. This applied to all people of the book (Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians) but eventually was expanded to include almost anyone of non-Muslim heritage. The primary goal of practicing jihad in this way was to make the enemy a beneficial element of the Islamic world as quickly as possible.

While this is how the medieval Muslims looked at jihad, one may note a clear apologetic tone in the modern re-interpretations of this controversial concept. This tendency was first noted in the 19th century when non-Muslims took the notion of jihad to mean a holy war forcefully imposed upon others. In response, Muslim apologists outwardly rejected the medieval notions of expansionist warfare and countered that both the Qur'an and the Hadith solely endorse defensive wars aimed at maintaining normative life against outside persecution. This apologetic tone was taken to its extreme in the hands of some British India Muslim writers. They argued that if no real threat existed to Islamic praxis, then no Muslim should oppose other colonial countries.

The Qur'an on Role of Women and Family

Regarding woman's role:

“Men are the maintainers of women because Allah has made some of them to excel others and because they spend out of their

property; the good women are therefore obedient, guarding the unseen as Allah has guarded; and (as to) those on whose part you fear desertion, admonish them, and leave them alone in the sleeping-places and beat them; then if they obey you, do not seek a way against them; surely Allah is High, Great.” (Surah IV: 34)

Regarding women who sin:

“And as for those who are guilty of an indecency from among your women, call to witnesses against them four (witnesses) among you; then if they bear witness confine them to the houses until death takes them away or Allah opens some way for them.” (Surah IV: 15)

Regarding divorce:

“And (as for) those of your women who have despaired of menstruation, if you have a doubt, their prescribed time shall be three months, and of those too who have not had their courses; and (as for) the pregnant women, their prescribed time is that they lay down their burden; and whoever is careful of (his duty to) Allah He will make easy for him his affair.” (Surah LXV: 4)

Regarding prostitution and slavery:

“...and do not compel your slave girls to prostitution, when they desire to keep chaste, in order to seek the frail good of this world’s life; and whoever compels them, then surely after their compulsion, Allah is Forgiving, Merciful.” (Surah XXIV: 33)

Regarding inheritance:

“Allah enjoins you concerning your children: The male shall have the equal of the portion of two females.” (Surah IV: 11)

Modernistic Reform

In the mid-nineteenth century, reform of a definitive modernistic mode began to make significantly evident inroads into the Muslim life and

thought, especially in India and Egypt, admittedly under the influence of Western thought and culture.

It could be argued that virtually all the major political and other world events of the twentieth century, the two World Wars, the collapse of the European colonial empires, the rise and fall of Communist world influence, the vast increase in the number of independent modern-day “nation-states”, the visible impact of technological advances in communications and the rise of the feminist movement, all had momentous ramifications for the Islamic world.

One of the first events was the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, and the abolition of the Caliphate in response to the instigation of the Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of the modern secular state of Turkey. As countries across Asia and Africa with majority Muslim populations gained their independence, the struggle began between those who favored European style secular Constitutions, with religious and personal status for peoples of all creeds and ethnic backgrounds, and those who insisted upon establishing Islamic states governed by Shariah, the traditional Islamic Law. This Muslim search for identity in a modern world where peoples could choose their own forms of government spread from North Africa to Indonesia, during the first two thirds of the twentieth century, as European colonial powers gradually lost control of their former territories.

In this search for identity, Muslims have organized themselves into a wide variety of movements and parties that have continued, modified, or reacted against the concerns of the nineteenth and early twentieth century revivalists.

Holidays and Festivals

Id al-Fitr – All the following holidays are held according to the Muslim calendar which follows a lunar cycle. This holiday is celebrated on the 1st day of the 10th month. It is the festival that follows the one month fast of Ramadan. Accordingly, it celebrates the end of the month long fast with the viewing of the new moon the night before. If one had to compare this holiday to an American holiday it would be Thanksgiving. Fasting is absolutely forbidden on this day. There are many customs associated with this day. For example, dates and other sweets are eaten on the morning of

the holiday. Also, certain adorning and bathing rites are practiced. Some Muslims hand out products to the poor showing that the message of Ramadan was not lost on them. Gifts are also handed out to family and children.

Eid ul-Adha - This is the second holiday of the Muslim calendar. This four day holiday and celebration occurs in the month following the last holiday so it falls the same time that Hajj would occur. Many of the rites associated with Id al-Fitr also are practiced on Eid ul-Adha At the start of the holiday, at the Mosque or prayer area, a special prayer is recited by the congregation in honor of the holiday.

Jainism

SYMBOL OF JAINISM



The hand signifies friendly re-assurance and ethical responsibility. Ahimsa (non-violence) is in the middle.

JAIN PRAYER

Namaskaar-Mantra

I bow to the ever-perfect spiritual victors;
I bow to the liberated souls;
I bow to the leaders of the Jain order;
I bow to the learned preceptors;
I bow to all saints and sages, of the world;

These five obeisances erase all sins;

Amongst all that is auspicious, this is the foremost.

Jain Temple

Ranikhet, India



JAINISM

at a glance

A religion that started around the same time as Buddhism, Jainism can be traced to its Indian roots around the year 600 B.C. Claiming roughly a million and half adherents worldwide, most Jains live in India where they are roughly a half percent of the overall population.

In many ways, Jainism is like Hinduism but with a slight twist. Where other religions place God or monotheism, Jains place non-violence (Ahimsa). As a result of their acceptance of non-violence, Jains choose to be strict vegetarians, rejecting violence in all its forms. In fact, some people are inclined to view Jainism, not a religion, but as a philosophy.

Compassion towards all living creatures is the hallmark, of the ethical-practices espoused by Jainism. Asceticism, humility, non-vindictiveness, and truthful living are the other touchstones and yardsticks by which an adherent is judged. Patience, calm and composure are advised. Love and hatred, both, are forms of attachment, hence both must be shunned as they arise out of ignorance and delusion. This is the way one could become eligible for deliverance from the tortures of several births and deaths.

Lord Mahavira, the 24th 'Tirthankara', enjoined upon his followers to adhere to the five great vows, prohibiting: killing, lying, stealing, sexual and sensual pleasures and attachments. In fact, the root of the misery in the world is the link between the physical body and the eternal, pure spirit of man. This theory is known, philosophically, as 'dualism'. 'Matter' and 'spirit' are two, absolutely, different states-of-being. The practical application of this means that physical-needs may be suppressed, for the sake of liberating the soul. This, then, is the blessed state, where one becomes released from all encumbrances of the body, as also from all deeds (Karma) of previous births.

Basic Tenets and Theology

Knowledge, faith, and righteous conduct, are the three jewels of Jainism. There is no caste-structure and congregations are formed, without any distinction. But, Jainism has been unable to remain aloof completely from the influence of the caste-system. So much so that even the Jain gods and deities have been arranged, according to the social 'ranks'. Adding on to this self-contradiction, Jainism says that just as some classes perform menial jobs for others, on earth, so do some of the deities serve the higher deities, in heaven. Hence, the inference is that the caste system dominates Heaven as well as on earth.

In the beginning, the existence of God was denied, just as in Buddhism. Mahavira rejected outright the Hindu polytheistic belief in various natural and supernatural powers as being superfluous. He ridiculed the practice of praying to an image or an idol of a deity. The usual cosmological argument for a Creator was dismissed categorically and denounced as a sign of sheer ignorance.

Mahavira accepts the doctrine of Karma as administering moral retribution in a future life. It is an impersonal, cosmic power that is active, knowable and inescapable. This is in sharp contrast to the Hindu theology that says that God is unknowable and metaphysical.

The 24 'Tirthankaras' have been venerated in Jainism.

Role of Women and Family

The Digambara sect does not accord any reverential position to a woman, who they believe cannot attain Salvation unless she is reborn as a man, on account of her worthy, noble deeds. The Shvetambara sect's men and idols are clad in white. The Sthanakvasi sect is non-idolatrous.

Nav Tattvas

There are many ways in which one could describe Jain philosophy, but the most adequate way to describe it is through the Nav Tattvas (9 fundamentals). They are:

- 1) Jiva (soul)
- 2) Ajiva (non-living matter)
- 3) Punya (results of good deeds)
- 4) Pap (results of bad deeds)
- 5) Asrava (influx of karmas)
- 6) Samvar (stoppage of karmas)
- 7) Bandh (bondage of karmas)
- 8) Nirjara (eradication of karmas)
- 9) Moksha (liberation)

Even after founding a new religious movement, Mahavira continued to believe in two basics of Hindu thought: Karma, as the impersonal law of moral-retribution, and faith in re-incarnation.

In its most basic and pure form, the soul is not bound by physical limitations. Much like a god would have, the soul possesses unlimited perception, knowledge and vigor. Furthermore, it is not inherently attached to any physical life form. One might wonder why these facets of the soul cannot be seen, nor are exemplified in the world. This is because the soul has the pitfall of bad karma attached to it. By following the traditional path towards perfection, a Jain is able to overcome bad Karma and allow the soul to return to its most pure form.

One of the most important rituals that a Jain could do is the pratikraman. Every day, Jains must repent for all the bad things and thoughts they experienced. They must acknowledge their errors and ask pardon. By doing so, they are minimizing the negative effects that karma will have on them.

Pratikraman is a combination of six avshyakas (essential rituals). The six avshyakas are:

- 1) Samayik - a state of total equanimity
- 2) Chauvisantho - worshipping the 24 Tirthankars
- 3) Vandana - offering salutations to sadhus (monks) and sadhvis (nuns)
- 4) Pratikraman - realizing what we have done wrong and annotating on it
- 5) Kayotsagga - meditation of the soul
- 6) Pratyakhyan - renunciation

Holidays and Festivals

Jains celebrate three main holidays that, actually, Hindus celebrate as well. They are Rakhi, Dusserah and Puja. Nonetheless, as the Jains do not keep an identical calendar to the Hindus, the dates do not always coincide.

The first holiday, Rakhi, commemorates the Indrani's actions. On this holiday, women fashion amulets for their loved ones to commemorate what Indrani had done. She was the wife of the head of the gods. Legend tells that there once was a war between the demons and the gods and the gods were losing. Indrani prepared a bracelet for her husband to wear. Whenever the demons saw the amulet upon this god, they recoiled until finally the gods won the battle.

The second holiday is called Dusserah or Durja Puja in some parts of India. Like our last holiday involving the defeat of the demons at the hands of the gods, this holiday also commemorates the defeat of evil at the hands of the good. According to the legend, Rama vanquished the demon Ravana. It is celebrated for ten days. The highlights of this festival include re-enactments of the battle between Rama and Ravana, as well as services where forgiveness between mates is the central aspect of the ceremony.

The third festival is Diwali and it is also called the Festival of Lights; it is the New Year for Jains. This date also coincides when the great saint Mahavira past away. While the Jains celebrate the first two days much in the same way in which Hindus do, the third day is the close of the financial calendar. On this day, all accounts are settled, and all bills from the previous twelve months are paid. The fourth day is the real day for celebrating the New Year in which Jains visit family and friends.

Elements of Strength

- In Jainism, self-sacrifice and renunciation teach discipline.
- The installation of religious values regarding the soul which is placed high on a pedestal subordinating all other needs (material, physical, emotional).
- Tolerance of all living creatures, channelized for obtaining constructive results.

Distinctions

- Protests against belief in deities and God.
- Opposes monistic philosophy that interprets the individual soul and all matter as a phase of the world-soul. Mahavira accepts the former half.
- Opposed to animal sacrifices for propitiation. Instead, a feeling of sacrificing all that one had was stressed. This would be a step towards the elevation of one's own soul, and not for the appeasement of God or any deity.
- Prayers, ceremonies, priests and rituals were not pre-requisites for attaining salvation.
- The usage of the archaic Sanskrit language used in Hinduism was criticized. Instead, the vernacular Prakrit was popularized for the sacred Jain texts, as it is very easy to read and to comprehend.
- Opposed self-centered thoughts of caste, religion and nation, Jainism preached tolerance and understanding universally. Mahavira is said to have received Divine Command to propagate a world order and religion that would break all barriers.
- Condemnation of women and family life.
- General indifference and apathy towards joy, beauty, celebration and the world as a whole.

Judaism

SYMBOL OF JUDAISM



The Star of David

Also known as ‘The Magen David’, the six-pointed star is the symbol most commonly associated with Judaism today. The star is supposed to represent the shape of King David’s shield.

JEWISH PRAYER

Hear my cry, O God;

listen to my prayer.

From the ends of the earth I call to you,

I call as my heart grows faint;

lead me to the rock that is higher than I.

For you have been my refuge,

a strong tower against the foe

I long to dwell in your tent forever

and take refuge in the shelter of your wings.

Psalms 61. 1-4

Jewish Temple



Beth El Temple of West Hartford

J U D A I S M

at a glance

Judaism is the oldest of the Middle-eastern religions. It is the parent-religion of the two widespread world-faiths: Christianity and Islam. It is the religion of God's chosen people of Israel. Their belief is that there is only One God, who is omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, just and gracious. He created humans, in His own image, who are capable of attaining human perfection and reaching the pinnacle, through God's grace and love.

Judaism is a monotheistic faith, as are Christianity, Islam, and Sikhism. Abraham founded Judaism around 1850 B.C, in the Middle-Eastern lands. The soul, according to Judaism, is the breath of God, and it is immortal, just as God is. The universe was created out of nothingness (void/vacuum) by the single utterance of one word of God. Since God is good, His creation is good too.

Jews believe that there is no devil. Whosoever transgresses the will of the Lord, commits a sin. Evil springs up when one forsakes the heavenly-path, and blindly follows senses, superstitions and rituals. The existence of evil tendencies is a test for human beings, who have been blessed with the intellect to make their choice of the ideal path they wish to follow. Sincerity, selflessness, prayer, repentance and service-to-humanity, are the essentials for attaining true peace and happiness.

The prophets of ancient Israel perceived the activity of Yahweh in the history of their people. They saw that Yahweh, the 'God of the Exodus', brought oppressed people, living in bondage, to freedom and a new way of life.

From about 1000 B.C., a line of kings, beginning with David held the monarchical class in Israel. The Prophets recognized the continuance of Yahweh's guidance and protection in all the righteous kings, as he ascended the throne. But, not all kings were faithful, and the Prophets looked more and more towards the future, when they expected a king like

David, who would be strong enough to lead the people to freedom, and to restore Israel to its former pre-eminent position.

The Tanakh (an acronym for Torah, Neviim-Prophets and Ketubim-Writings), especially the Torah or Pentateuch (first five books of the Tanakh), are considered very sacred. The Talmud (explanation of the Tanakh), teachings of each branch (the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reformists) and the writings of the sages, such as the Maimonides, are also significantly revered works.

For Orthodox Jews, God is the Spirit, personal, all-powerful, eternal and compassionate. They do not have faith in the Holy Trinity. Jesus is not considered to be the Savior by the Jews. Only Jews for Jesus, who reject most of traditional Judaism, accept Jesus as the Savior.

Some Jews believe that prayer, repentance, and obeying the Godly-laws are essential for attaining Salvation. The obedient shall be honored, and they shall live forever, with God, while the unrighteous shall be condemned.

The Prophet Ezekiel had a vision that may have allowed him to peer into the twentieth century. It's possible, say some modern commentators, that he saw both, the holocaust and the birth of the State of Israel. To him was given a vision of "a valley with lifeless, dry and dead bones".

As per his own limited human thinking, it was clear to him that these bones could never again come back to life. But God told Ezekiel: "Say to the breath, thus says the Lord God, come oh breath from the four winds, and breathe into these slain, that they may live again".

And, amazingly enough, the corpses then stood on their feet. The dead lived, once again.

Then God explained to him what the vision meant, in detail. "Oh mortal, these bones are the whole House of Israel. They say our bones are dried up, our hope is gone; we are doomed. Thus says the Lord God, I am going to open your graves, and lift you out of the graves, oh my people, and bring you to the land of Israel.... I will put my breath into you and you shall live again... I will set you upon your own soil".

Ezekiel was addressing the Jewry of Babylonia. They felt they had no hope: they were mere bones who would no longer live.

They believed Jewish history was at its end. For them, Ezekiel expressed the Prophecy of Hatikvah - the Hope. Ezekiel's vision proved to be correct for the Jews of his day. Babylonian Jewry returned to their land, and reclaimed their heritage.

European Jewry, in the mid-1940s, believed that with six million slaughtered they, too, were faced with a valley of dry and dead bones that could no longer live.

Yet, the words of Ezekiel proved to be a beacon-light for them, encouraging them to march on. The State of Israel was born, three years after the end of the Holocaust. Jews returned to the Promised Land, where they adopted, as their National Anthem, the song known as Hatikvah, based on a poem by Naftali Herz Inber.

The Torah

When Jews use the word Torah, or Bible, it can have three meanings. In its most restricted, and widely used meaning, it is a synonym for the five books of Moses, encompassing the text that orthodox Jewry believes to be the direct communication between God and humankind.

The Torah found in the arch of every synagogue is a copy of these five holy books, painstakingly handwritten on parchment, which together are called the Pentateuch, coming from the root word 'penta' meaning five.

The Jewish disfavor the Jewish Bible being designated as the Old Testament by the Christians. They assert that it bears an uncomplimentary connotation.

Many Christians believe that the special covenant between God and the Jewish people was taken away and given to the new Israel of the Church.

The Bible of the Jews, as per Christian claims, was also superseded by a new and improved version, that they call the New Testament, thereby rendering much of the former Testament old and outdated. To Jews,

however, the Bible remains extremely precious, always new, fresh and relevant, for all generations. It's the Only Testament for them.

The Torah can also refer to the later books of the Prophets appended to the five books of Moses. Together, these form what is referred to by the Jews as the Bible. In this larger version of the Bible, there are 24 books in all.

And now, the third meaning of Torah. This is based on its literal definition. Torah is a teaching, a doctrine, a law. Any discussion of the Bible, any analysis that helps us to understand the Bible better is a teaching, and therefore qualifies to be called Torah.

The deeper root meaning of Torah is that it springs from the word 'yarah' which means "to teach" or teachings.

The first five books of the Torah are named after the first word that appears in the book or the general theme of the book.:

- 'Genesis' comes from the word for 'beginning'. The book takes us from Creation and the beginning of history, through the founding fathers of the Jewish people, and the beginning of the story of the children of Israel.
- 'Exodus' means "going out". This book deals primarily with the exodus of the Jews from Egypt, where they had been enslaved, and the building of the tabernacle.
- 'Leviticus' is named after the tribe Levi, those appointed to serve in the Temple. This book gives the detailed instructions of Temple service and sacrifices.
- 'Numbers', the fourth book gives us the census of the Jews in the desert and follows their wanderings, as they approached the Promised Land.
- 'Deuteronomy' literally means "the second law". This is the lengthy last speech of Moses to his people, his farewell address, recapitulating what had happened to the Jews until then, as well as the covenant they made with God, that would ensure their survival.

The Biblical Heroes

Abraham

Abraham was the founder of the Jewish people and was originally called Abram. After he became a believer, his name was changed to make it encompass a wider meaning “father of many nations” (av hamon goy'im). Earlier Abram (Avrom) or “father of Arom” restricted his leadership to a small group. Accepting monotheism, Abraham was now given charge of spreading the word of God. His new name was given to teach him not to simply “keep the faith” but to spread it, far and wide. He was on a mission to share the spiritual truths with the entire world, not a small limited area.

Sarah

Abraham's wife Sarah also had another name before her conversion to Judaism. She was Sarai, “my princess”, in accordance with a title worthy of a Jewish wife. She now became a co-partner with Abraham in spreading his missionary gospel. And, so now, she became Sarah (Princess) for the entire mankind.

Isaac and Rebecca

Isaac, the son of Sarah and Abraham, carried forward the spiritual teachings of his parents. His name is derived from the Hebrew root for laughter, because it seemed a big joke, when an Angel told Abraham aged 100 and Sarah aged 90 that they would be blessed with a child. The birth of Isaac (Yitshak) proved that when God promises, nothing is impossible.

Rebecca (Rivkah) in Hebrew means “to bind together”. She tied her future to Isaac, the man who loved God so much that he was willing to be bound on the altar, ready for being sacrificed.

Jacob

Jacob (Ya'akov) in Hebrew means: "heel". A child of Isaac and Rebecca, he was passive, introverted, and non-confrontational in his early years. He was somebody on whom people could easily "step upon" and dominate. Only later in life he realized that he had to change to win, for God doesn't fight all the battles for us, if we are not ready and willing to work a little. In a traumatic moment, when he fought an unnamed attacker, his name was changed to Israel (Yisrael), meaning "a fighter for God".

Rachel

She was the love of Jacob's life. Her name comes from "the beloved". When his prospective father-in-law Laban made him work seven years, for Rachel's hand, Jacob worked happily. But, Laban was deceitful. He gave Leah, the older daughter, in marriage. That was when Jacob used to be trampled upon by all. And so he worked another seven years for his true love. Since bigamy wasn't banned then, he was doubly blessed, marrying both Rachel and Leah.

The Twelve Tribes

The next twelve heroes came in rapid succession: Ruben, Simon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulan, Dan, Naftali, Gad, Asher, Joseph, and Benjamin. These are the children of Israel, each of whom eventually had such large families that each had a tribe of his own to lead. Everyone was as different as twelve months of a year. According to mystical teachings of the Kabbalah, each of them is, in fact, linked to the twelve months.

When the Jewish people later settled in Canaan, the Promised Land of Israel, the country was divided into twelve sections so that every tribe could have its own domain. The result was something of a confederation of autonomous states, enjoined by a treaty of sorts, maintaining a distinctive quality, while sharing common ideals and objectives, remaining unified as one nation.

Moses

Three generations after the children of Israel were born, Amrom, the grandson of Levi, married Yocheved, and they had a child named Moses. Unfortunately, they did not even have the opportunity to name their child at that time, faced with persecution from the Egyptians, they had to hide the child, in a little ark or boat, to prevent him from being killed.

The Pharaoh had decreed that all newborn males should be killed. The parents were hoping for Godly intervention, because nothing is impossible when God wills it. Pharaoh's daughter, ironically enough, found the ark floating in the water, and rescued the child. She, like the modern-day saint Raoul Wallenberg, became the savior for the child, and named him Moses, because "from the water she drew him". She raised him in the very place where he would later play a prominent role for his people. Who would have known that this would be the man who would become the greatest leader in all of Jewish history?

Aaron

Aaron was the brother of Moses. It must have been tough for Aaron to accept that his kid brother Moses had overshadowed him. Moses outshined Aaron. But Aaron was a great man in his own right, and was also given a position of prominence by God. He became the High Priest in the cult, charged with overseeing all the religious duties, functions and responsibilities that go with such a charge.

Role of Women and Family

The Bible describes God as taking the rib from man and "building" it into a woman. It uses the Hebrew word '*va'yiven*' which is related to the word for profound understanding. Based on that, the Talmud concludes that God endowed women with more insight and intuitive intelligence than men.

And when the Talmud wonders why, at the time of Revelation, God told Moses to first “speak to the daughters of Israel” before addressing the men, and to ask them whether they wished to receive the Torah, the response is: “Because the way of men is to follow the opinion of women.”

Woman is seen to have one more attribute in much greater measure than man. The Hebrew word for kindness, *rachamim*, has as its root *rechem*, which means womb.

The very name of God that expresses this characteristic of mercifulness and compassion appears in Hebrew with a feminine ending. God Herself sometimes chooses to be more like a woman.

One of the very first directives God gave to Adam and Eve was, “Be fruitful and multiply.” Jewish theologians explain that principle, *imitatio Dei*, (imitating God) tells Jews that in order to be like God, they must create in order to continue the world God brought into being. According to Hebraic law, Jews may not remain childless. The minimum number of children necessary to fulfill this ‘requirement’ is two: one boy and one girl. Of course, if a married couple tries and fails to conceive, they cannot be blamed. But to avoid parenthood is considered a sin.

Traditions

Jewish law provides guidance to its followers from the cradle to the grave. The Jewish people have been persecuted for many ages. As such, children are their secret to survival and a viable future.

Jews often congratulate each other with the words ‘*mazel tov*’. The phrase is generally translated to mean ‘good luck’, however *mazel* refers to a constellation, one of the signs of the Zodiac. While Jews may not believe that the stars determine fate, some may believe that the stars have an influence. Mosaic floors in some of the ancient synagogues depict the signs of the Zodiac.

Jewish tradition says that when parents choose a name for a new baby, they will be blessed with Divine Inspiration. Jewish children are given a Jewish name in addition to their secular one. Ashkenazim Jews of Western Europe are forbidden to name a child after a living person. They believe that it is too soon to see if the living person will turn out wicked in the end and that it would therefore be unfair to link a child to someone whose end is unsure. The Sephardic Jews, from Eastern European and Oriental heritage, believe in honoring a person they most respect and admire during their lifetime by naming children after them.

A girl is given her Jewish name at the synagogue on the Sabbath closest to her birth. A boy receives his name on the eighth day after his birth as part of the *brit millah*, or circumcision ceremony.

Circumcision in the Bible is called a “sign of the flesh”. By removing the foreskin, a Jew becomes visibly different in his very body. It is a spiritual link with God that can never be removed. The person who performs the circumcision is known as a *mohel* and the person who holds the baby, a great honor indeed, is called the *sandek*. In mystic tradition, the sandek is showered with blessings from God for his role. When the circumcision is complete, all present join in a prayer of three wishes to the child: “May he grow to Torah, to *chuppah* (the wedding canopy), and to good deeds.”

When a male child reaches the age of 13, he becomes *Bar Mitzvah*, or a “son of the commandments”. He is called to the Torah to recite blessings or lead the congregation in prayer. On this day, a boy becomes a man because he is considered mature enough to be responsible for his actions.

Judaism recognizes that girls mature faster than boys and for this reason, girls receive *Bat Mitzvah* when they reach the age of 12.

In Judaism, marriage is clearly commanded in the Bible: “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and cleave unto his wife, and they

shall be one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). When a wedding date is set, there is only one restriction: a wedding cannot be held on the same day as another Jewish festival. This is because Jews are told, “We must not mix one joy with another” (Talmud, Moed Katan, 8b). The ceremony itself takes place under a canopy called a *chuppah*. In the first part of the ceremony, the bride circles the husband seven times, mystically demonstrating that she is entering the seven spheres of her beloved’s soul.

Probably the most commonly recognized feature of a Jewish wedding ceremony is the breaking of a glass by the groom at the conclusion. Though marriage is considered a time of supreme happiness, the breaking of the glass is to remind Jewish people that their joy cannot be complete as long as the Temple in Jerusalem remains destroyed. It reminds them that rejoicing must be tempered with remembrance of their people’s catastrophes. In modern terms, it would be the equivalent of saying they must never forget the Holocaust, no matter how happy they are.

Death, in the Jewish view, is a matter of going from one room to another, ultimately, a far more beautiful location. Judaism teaches that God endowed humans with His essence and therefore, “the spirit returns unto God who gave it.” Death is the moment of separation of the soul from the body.

Orthodox Jews are profoundly opposed to cremation. Jewish tradition demands a simple pine coffin. Burial follows so that the Biblical decree, “to dust you shall return” can be fulfilled with the body’s decay in the ground. The deceased must also be buried as quickly as possible, ideally no later than 24 hours, to avoid shaming the body by neglecting its required religious procedure. The deceased is buried in a clean, white handmade shroud without pockets, the final symbol of life signifying that “you can’t take it with you.”

The seven days following a person’s death is a time of mourning known as “sitting *shiva*”. This is a time when friends share meaningful stories with the relatives of the deceased and help them to cope by helping them to remember all of the positive memories that remain that death cannot erase.

The Festivals

The Jewish Sabbath, or *Shabbat*, is the seventh day of every week which is set aside for one to become recharged spiritually. Judaism does not have names for the days of the week, and therefore, Sunday is considered the first day to *Shabbat*, which causes the Sabbath to fall on Friday evening as the Jewish day starts at nightfall.

Judaism recognizes a number of religious festivals throughout the year. Two holidays, which are considered High Holy Days are: Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

Rosh Hashana has also been called the Jewish New Year. The name literally means “head of the year” and is instituted in Leviticus 23:24-25, with the sounding of the ram’s horn (or *shofar*) as a day of remembrance. It is a time of introspection, to look back on the mistakes of the past year and to plan changes for the upcoming year. No work is permitted on this holiday and much of the day is spent in synagogue. On this day, Jews believe that God brings out his scales, in order to weigh the deeds of every person. The way the scales tilt will determine a person’s fate for the coming year.

Yom Kippur is celebrated nine days after Rosh Hashana. The days in between are known as ‘the ten days of repentance’. Yom Kippur was selected as the Day of Atonement because it remembers when God forgave the Jews for worshipping a golden calf. Moses had pleaded with God for forty days and forty nights to gain His forgiveness for his people for their idolatrous sin.

Passover is a widely celebrated holiday, which commemorates the liberation of the Jews from Pharaoh’s bondage in the days of ancient Egypt. According to the Bible, Moses pleaded with Pharaoh to “let my people go.” When Pharaoh refused, God sent a series of ten plagues upon the Egyptians. The last was the most terrible, every firstborn Egyptian was to die at the stroke of midnight on the 15th of the Jewish month of Nissan. Jews, on the other hand, were to mark their doors with the blood of a

sacrificed lamb so that God could “pass over” the houses in which His people lived.

Since this holiday is considered to carry such import, rather than hosting the service in the synagogue, it is held at home, involving the people most involved in carrying on the tradition: the children. The special meal has a fixed order and is called a *seder*. A special prayer- book called a *haggadah* is used for the occasion. The Egyptians were so anxious to be rid of the Jews after being inundated by the ten plagues, they forced them to flee before their bread could rise. The flat, unleavened bread called *matzah*, happily recreates the Jews’ quick departure from slavery. Christians know this meal as The Last Supper. This is the meal that Jesus partook of before his execution by the Romans.

Shavuot commemorates the day the Jews received the Law of God and were taught that true freedom means being free to be themselves, to be happy and to be holy. After leaving Egypt, God told the Jews that it would take them 49 days to reach Mt. Sinai. On the 50th day, they were to be given the Torah.

Sukkot is the holiday that celebrates Jewish survival in the face of impossible odds. Under God’s special care, the Jews spent forty years wandering the desert before they could arrive at the Promised Land with the Torah after leaving Mt. Sinai. During this time, God fed the Jews with *manna* (bread from the sky) and for protection from the harsh sun, clouds followed the Jews on their journey. During the eight days of this holiday, Jews build small huts called *sukkahs*. The point is to exchange the security of a house for a frail structure, making one realize that one’s ultimate protection comes from God.

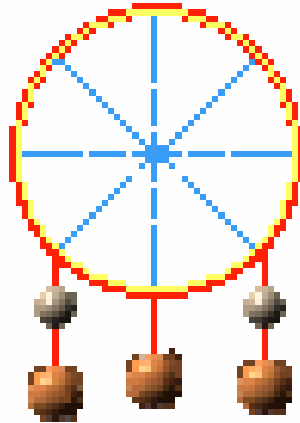
Purim is a holiday that teaches Jews never to be silent in the face of those who want to destroy them. The story began when Esther became the wife of King Xerxes after he got rid of his wife because she did not obey him. Esther hid her Jewish heritage from the king, until she learned that one of his top advisors, Haman, was planning a mass execution of Jews on a day of his choosing because Mordecai, a Jew, had refused to bow down to

him. Esther revealed her heritage to the King who recognizes that Haman deserves to be hanged. This holiday is celebrated with conspicuous consumption of wine.

Hannukah, or The Festival of Lights, celebrates the miraculous burning of one day's worth of oil to burn for eight days. Judah Maccabee led a revolt against Antiochus IV, who had ordered that the altar of the Jewish temple be desecrated by ordering the sacrifice of pigs (a non-kosher animal) upon it. Judah won back the temple and it was rededicated. The rededication required the lighting of the menorah; however, there was only one jar of oil available that would last but one night. Miraculously, it burned for eight days.

Native Americans

SYMBOL OF NATIVE AMERICANS



The Medicine Wheel

Native American symbol of the Universe also called the "Hoop of Life" embracing the belief that all things are in cycles and just as a circle has no beginning or end, so also goes Life ~ to Walk in Beauty and Balance around the Wheel, experiencing all things through Gratitude, living in Peace and Harmony within the shade of the Sacred Tree at the Center of the Wheel, these are the visions of this Life Circle.

NATIVE AMERICAN PRAYER

Great Spirit Prayer (origin unknown)

“Oh, Great Spirit, whose voice I hear in the wind,
Whose breath gives life to all the world.
Hear me; I need your strength and wisdom.
Let me walk in beauty, and make my eyes ever behold the red
and purple sunset.
Make my hands respect the things you have made and my ears
sharp to hear your voice.
Make me wise so that I may understand the things you have
taught my people.
Help me to remain calm and strong in the face of all that comes
towards me.
Let me learn the lessons you have hidden in every leaf and
rock.
Help me seek pure thoughts and act with the intention of
helping others.
Help me find compassion without empathy overwhelming me.
I seek strength, not to be greater than my brother, but to fight
my greatest enemy – Myself.
Make me always ready to come to you with clean hands and
straight eyes,
So when life fades, as the fading sunset, my spirit may come to
you without shame.

Native American

Cheyenne Sun Dance Lodge



NATIVE AMERICANS -AMERICAN INDIANS *at a glance*

Like Buddhism, some practitioners and believers of one of the Native American forms of religion do not deem their metaphysical beliefs or practices as constituting as religion per se. As their beliefs are an integral aspect of their essence and their very being, there is no way to differentiate between their non-religious life and their religious life; they form one coherent unit.

Native Religious Development

As the Native American religions developed in different areas in the continent and with various landscapes, economies, group sizes, etc., there are great differences between the many groups.

For example, when one takes note of the many aboriginal religions throughout the world, there appears to be a correspondence between many of their philosophies and the method for acquiring their sustenance. Whether they are vegetarians, fisherman, carnivores, gatherers or hunters, the means for acquiring these foods will become a dominant aspect of the religion. This happens to also be the case when we investigate Native American religions

Obviously, one of the most dramatic changes that occurred within the relatively primitive lifestyle of the Native Americans is the arrival of the Europeans. Not only did they have to adjust their lifestyles, militaries and economies, they had to deal with terrible plagues and sicknesses which the Europeans had already become immune to. Furthermore, through slavery and systematic implementations of extermination plans, the Native American peoples were dramatically weakened, such that they would never be able to rise to the heights that they once occupied in the North American continent.

Paralleling their estimation of religions around the world, Christian missionaries spread the Gospel completely disregarding the native religion regarding it as superstitious, inspired by the works of the devil, or just silly. Forced conversion was the norm of those who avoided the mass exterminations. Eventually, reparations were offered to the survivors in Canada and in the U.S. in the form of reservations, even though, officially, the governments desired for the remnants to assimilate with the rest of the populace.

In fact, Native American religions were suppressed by both the government of Canada and the U.S. Their leaders were sometimes imprisoned, even up to thirty years, for preaching or practicing in accordance with their beliefs. In 1978, the Freedom of Religion Act was ratified putting a conclusive end to this sorry part of North American history.

Native Spiritual Traditions Today

When one travels to any of the many Native American communities around the country, for the most part, one will find that a large percentage of them converted to Christianity generations ago. Nonetheless, certain pockets around the continent have been able to stay true to their roots, particularly those around the New Mexico area. Most Native Americans follow some type of syncretism between their aboriginal beliefs and Christology.

In recent times, the Native American world has seen a growing interest in their aboriginal beliefs and values; this is called 'Pan Indianism.' Unlike the original versions of the individual tribes, this movement attempts to create a more unified and coherent Native American religion.

Today, there exists the Native American Church. Its origins could be traced to the ancient Peyote religion. This earlier religion employed the psychedelic drug from cactuses called peyote as an integral element within many of their religious services. Originally, this church's goal was to

integrate traditional Christian dogmas with peyote as the sacrament. As peyote is an illegal drug throughout the U.S., this branch of Native American religions needed special protection, promised by the Constitution, allowing this sect to practice religion freely. As the drug is unlike alcohol in that it is not habit forming, it has been embraced as a religious outlet for thousands of years, nonetheless, many Christian and Native American groups reject it.

The Inuit

Paralleling those cultures that are found in the frigid circumpolar regions like Scandinavia and Russia, the Eskimo or Inuit culture have a precarious lifestyle. They have to learn to thrive in the cold and ward off the constant danger of starvation.

The Eskimos believe that souls (anua) are possessed not only by all human beings, but also by all animals. Only by falling in line with an abstruse system of taboos and rituals will the Inuit be able to find and partake of food. Accordingly, religious rituals are executed both before a hunt sets out and after its completion in order to help ensure the success of that endeavor.

Like the Greek gods, the Inuit believe that there are individual gods for specific notions. For example, Sedna, the underwater goddess cares for all sea life. She is very much like a mermaid in that she has body parts from the fish world as well as from the human world. Only if the Inuit follow the rituals to a tee will Sedna share her bounty with the people by sending aquatic life their way. Similarly, a god exists for all other areas of their lives, who, if appeased, will assist the Inuit in their daily activities

Each tribe has a spiritual head; he is called a Shaman. He is not freely elected or even chosen for the job. Usually, from a very young age, the shaman feels a calling from the spiritual world to act in the way that he does. Not only is he able to act as the town doctor, prescribing the remedies for both physical and spiritual maladies, he is able to evaluate the efficacy of the taboos, explaining how they should be altered or

improved upon in order to ensure their efficacy. He can even identify the exact individual or element in a ritual that was lacking. He does this by allowing spirits to enter his body during some musical services. He does this by engaging in a meditative state. In this trance, the shaman temporarily leaves his body and enters the spiritual world.

Eastern Sub-Arctic, Eastern Woodlands, Plains and Southwest Cultures

There are many parallels between this culture and that of the Eskimos as they live in similar climates and conditions. Nonetheless, as there are many varieties of these religions, we will, in the following, list some of the similarities shared by all of them.

Deity – The Deity is not the monotheistic god common to the western tradition, but that of a dual divinity: First, there is the Creator god who made this universe, and is also identified as the one that prayers and rites should be directed towards. But second, there is the mythical individual. He is both heroic and sinister. He is like the personal deity of the tribe giving them the means for ethical and economic wellbeing.

Under these two godly figures stand the spirits who control the day to day items like the climate. These spirits are not abstract objects that have no bearing on the physical world, but beings who daily interact with people. Working together, the gods and the spirits create the framework for which humans interact in.

Creation – Unlike the Abrahamic traditions, different tribes teach different creation narratives. One version of their accounts is that at the beginning of time, the world was already heavily populated. These people, however, did not remain in their human form. Afterward, they were changed into animals. This creation myth goes a long way in explaining the respect for and various rituals done to animals. In many of the rituals, the instinctive behaviors associated with individual animals are mimicked by the tribe. The link does not stop there. Actually, each animal species

has a theoretical alpha specimen which is the recognized leader of all animals of that species. For example, for all the buffalos in the world, there is one master buffalo who controls the fate of all the species. For mankind, this master is God.

Emergence of the Tribe – Another creation myth, pushed specifically in the Southwest, has to do with the universe's inner workings. It is envisioned that the universe has countless obscure and murky subterranean strata which mankind had to scale in order to free themselves. Somewhere there was a tiny hole in the crust of the earth in which mankind was able to escape.

Other tribes take a more traditional approach claiming that there was a first human being whom the tribes descended from.

Sacred Texts – There is no universal tribal language or writing. And, even the ones that do happen to possess writing forms do not necessarily have their traditions written down. More times than not, the mythic traditions have been passed down orally from generation to generation.

"If you take the Christian Bible and put it out in the wind and the rain, soon the paper on which the words are printed will disintegrate and the words will be gone. Our bible IS the wind." ~ anonymous Native American woman.

Afterlife – One cannot say with certainty that there is any formal belief system regarding the afterlife among Native religions. While some believe in ghosts, some in reincarnation and some in nothingness, in truth, their actual stance probably lies somewhere in the middle.

Cosmology – Each tribe will identify their place and importance within the world. One version of this system is the belief that the world is a three-layered. Obviously, the physical world that we all experience is the middle slab. On top and below are two other slabs that are connected by the help

of a World Tree. This tree rests on the bottom slab, but it extends through our physical world with its head resting on the top layer.

Vision Quest – One of the rights of becoming is that pre-pubescent youngsters must enter into a vision quest. This test is a time when the boy is left alone in a forest, or somewhere in isolation, without food, water or provisions, so that he could achieve a higher spiritual state, unattainable within the normal life that he experiences. When the boy obtains a vision, he uses it to direct his own life. In this quest, he usually will gain a guardian animal or spirit that will be connected with him for the rest of his life.

Renewal Celebrations – Some of the celebrations and rituals that these peoples do are meant to re-create events of time immemorial, or even creation. For example, the Sun Dance does just that. These dances are multi-purposed: first, it shows a sense of gratitude to the gods for allowing them to live. Every day there is a regeneration of the world by the gods, without which mankind could not go on. Second, there is a social aspect to these get-togethers. People are able to fraternize with one another and help to ensure their familiarity with comrades and acquaintances. Even though the governments of Canada and the U.S. restrained the practice of these Sun Dances for many years, the tradition lived on, and is celebrated today regularly

Sweat Lodge – This is an edifice, sometimes large, sometimes not, which is similar to a steam room or sauna covered by blankets or skins. Just as one feels a sense of freshness and purity after one exits a sauna, these physical feelings are meant to be symbolic for the efficacy of the actual rituals done there.

Hunting ceremonies – The main element of the rituals associated with hunts is after the actual hunt is over. One must realize that when one successfully captures and kills an animal it is because the spirits allowed him to and assisted him in that endeavor. Accordingly, one must thank the spirits for their assistance in order to ensure that these will be as friendly and helpful during the next hunt.

Prophets – There is no notion like official prophets as in the Abrahamic traditions. Nonetheless, there is no shortage of famous individuals who could be deemed prophets in some sense., such as White Buffalo Woman, Handsome Lake, or Sweet Medicine.

Role of Women and Family

In the olden days, Native American women worked very hard and took pride in their work. Most of their work was done outside, resulting in a healthy lifestyle.

A husband had no real authority over a wife, and while customs differed from tribe to tribe, as a rule, a woman could leave her husband when she wished. Marriage involved mutual consent. An analysis of so called ‘wife-purchases’, found that they consist either of a mutual exchange of gifts by the families, or as compensation to the bride’s family for loss of her services.

Among such groups as the Iroquois, women had an important voice in tribal councils and the right to nominate candidates for chieftaincy of clan or tribe. A mother could even forbid her son to go on the warpath.

“My dear sisters the women, you have had a hard life to live in this world, yet without you this world would not be what it is. Wakan Tanka intends that you should bear much sorrow – comfort others in time of sorrow. By your hands the family moves.” (Sioux Tradition of the Sacred Pipe)

Corruption of Native Beliefs

Just because we have described a certain fluidity within Native American spirituality and values, it is common for them to reject the notion of modern syncretic or assimilative practices. Like most religions, integration

within society to the point that many of the religious rites and rituals disintegrate is perceived very negatively.

Some Lakota leaders once said in a “Declaration of War Against Exploiters of Lakota Spirituality.”

“...having our most precious Lakota ceremonies and spiritual practices desecrated, mocked and abused by non-Indian ‘wannabes’, hucksters, cultists, commercial profiteers and self-styled ‘New Age shamans’ and their followers.”

Examples of commercial profiteering include: the selling of Sacred Pipes at flea markets, profit making groups holding sweat lodges, Sun Dances, shamanism and vision quests for sale, mistaken and pejorative portrayal of Native Americans in both cinema and on network television and efforts to make run of the mill religions by superimposing Native practices upon more modern belief systems.

Sikhism

SYMBOL OF SIKHISM



The Khanda

There are two swords on the sides, symbolizing temporal and spiritual powers, and the double-edged sword in the middle represents a unity of these two sovereign powers. The circle symbolizes the infinitude of God, who has no beginning or end.

SIKH PRAYER

You are the Lord, we pray to You.

You have favored us with our being and our body.

You are our mother and father; we are Your progeny.

In Your Grace, lie many comforts and luxuries.

Nobody can ascertain the limits of Your Glory.

O Lord, You are higher than the highest.

The whole creation rests upon Your support.

Whatever has sprung from You, follows Your command.

God, Your ways are mysterious.

Nanak pleads: “I am your loving, ardent devotee.”

Gurdwara Sahib

Glen Cove, NY



SIKHISM

at a glance

Sikhism is a monotheistic religion that was revealed to Guru Nanak, the Sikh Prophet, around 1501 C.E. It presents a unique message of love and tolerance for all humanity. Sikhism brought about a revolution by awakening the gullible, ignorant masses that were being exploited by the Hindu priestly class, the Brahmins, and who were oppressed by the tyranny of the Moslem invaders, the Mughals and the Afghans. Through the realization that all mankind is equal before God, the subjugated masses rebelled against the status quo, stemming the tide of oppression for the first time in 3000 years of South Asian history. The Sikh Prophets, using the Divine Revelation of God's Word as their inspiration, changed the course of history of South Asia, and (by implication) of the history of the world.

In order to achieve success in their noble mission, the Sikh Gurus practiced what they preached. They sacrificed their own lives and embraced martyrdom. Their innumerable disciples emulated their example by becoming equally valiant, and by laying down their lives for righteousness. The entire history of Sikhism is replete with sagas of martyrdom, for nurturing the sapling, planted by the Gurus. The postulates of Sikhism emphasize that the ultimate goal of a human-being is not a mystical reality in which the goal of the soul is to rejoin the original Oneness, but the actualization of mankind's innate ability to not only forge a relationship with God, but to take this vision and apply it to the real world. As the Sikh scripture declares, "The God-conscious person is animated with an intense desire to do good in this world."

Miracles

Miracles abounded in the life and times of the Founder, Guru Nanak through the Tenth Master, Guru Gobind Singh. Gurdwaras are now erected at places associated with these miracles, where the occurrences can be verified today.

- **The Indelible Imprint:** One of the most acclaimed of these is Panja Sahib, Pakistan, where Guru Nanak's hand left an indelible imprint on a rock in the village of Batala.
- **The Wall that Wouldn't Fall:** A weak wall, erected to kill Guru Nanak, while he sat near, stands even today, after five centuries.
- **Stone as Wax:** Guru Nanak's figurine has been framed in a rock, as if it were wax. Located in Ladakh region of Jammu & Kashmir, India.
- **Bitter into Sweet:** One branch of a tree gives sweet fruit, as a result of Guru Nanak's glance, while all other branches continue retaining their bitter nature. Location: Pilibhit, Uttar Pradesh in India.
- **The Mobile mosque:** A plate bearing reference to this incident, related with the visit of Guru Nanak, is preserved, reverentially, in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Innumerable other miracles cannot be listed as well.

It is amazing to note that some two centuries before scientists had even discovered the telescope, Guru Nanak, through revelation and spiritual powers, determined that many other planets, suns and moons existed. Furthermore, he conclusively elaborated upon the complexities of the creation of the universe, as written in the Sikh Scripture. It is quite a coincidence that as we write this, newspapers in America corroborate his statement, made over five centuries, ago, regarding the possibility of the existence of many suns, moons and life on other planets.

The Guru & The Sikh

The founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak Dev, was born in 1469 A.D., in Village Talwandi, near Lahore (now in Pakistan). Nanak was greatly inclined towards spirituality, even at a tender young age.

Guru, in Sikh terminology, means a Prophet and a world-teacher. In fact Sikhism is one of the world's prophetic religions in that its origins could be traced to a specific encounter with the Divine. Accordingly, one can draw a clear distinction between Sikhism and the eastern religions like

Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism, which have an anonymous mysticism as their source of validity.

Guru Nanak's encounter with God is described, metaphorically, in the *Janamsakhis* (textual-narrations, pertaining to his birth-lore) in the following words: "As God willed, Nanak, his devotee, was escorted to His presence, to the Divine Presence, and then a cup filled with Liquid of Immortality was given to him, accompanied by the command: Nanak, pay attention. This is the cup of holy adoration of my Name; drink it. I am with you, and you do I bless and exalt. Go, rejoice in my Name, the Name of God, and preach to others to do the same. Let this be your calling."

The term "Sikh" originates from ancient Pali texts, where the word "Sikho," is used to describe a 'searcher of truth'. A Sikh of Guru Nanak also strives to destroy the wall of nescience that separates him or her from Truth. "How will the Truth become known and how will the wall of nescience be pierced?" asks Guru Nanak in the first chapter of the Sikh scripture. He then answers: "It is possible, by following the Will of God and by being in tune with the Cosmic Law, we will be able to grasp Reality".

The Sikh Gurus wrote their revelations in various languages and dialects so they would be accessible to people without any intermediaries. Through this act, Sikhism rejected the priestly class of the time, which tried to control the religious practices of the people by writing all religious texts in Sanskrit, an ancient language that is difficult to understand. For the first time, a religion in the Eastern world offered access to God without the priestly class.

To understand the emergence and expansion of Sikhism, in true perspective, it is imperative that the prevailing conditions (and their ramifications) be studied.

Role of Women and Family

Islam and Hinduism were the two predominant faiths in the Indian subcontinent when Guru Nanak received his ministry from God. Hindus were engrossed in practices that are strongly condemned by Sikhism, such as idol-worship; female infanticide, sati (forcible burning of a widow on her husband's funeral-pyre) and the "devadasi" system, where girls who had attained puberty would be used to satiate the carnal desires of the

Brahmin priests. Polygamy was rampant; a man could have as many wives as he desired, and innumerable concubines. Women widows could not remarry. Young teen-aged girls were married off forcibly. Women had no access to education. Animals and even humans, especially virgin teenage girls approaching puberty, would be considered “most acceptable to the presiding-deity” of a tribe or of a family.

Sikhs do not adhere to any of those practices because Guru Amar Das, the third Sikh Prophet, who was a great defender of women’s rights, rejected them. He encouraged widows to remarry and banned the horrific practice of sati. Sikhs believe men and women are equal.

“From woman, man is born; within woman, man is conceived; to woman he is engaged and married. Woman becomes his friend; through woman, future generations come. When his woman dies; he seeks another woman; to woman he is bound. So why call her low? From her, kings are born. From woman, woman is born; without her, there would be no one at all.” (SGGS pg. 473)

Woman, as per Mahan Kosh, have 32 virtues over men which include humility, selfless service, compassion, contentment, mercy, patience, and many others. It is perhaps because of these qualities that in many places in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib, when Gurus had to show their extreme closeness to God, they presented themselves as female.

“The female is in the male, and the male is in the female. Understand this, O God-realized being! The meditation is in the music, and knowledge is in meditation. Become a devotee and speak the language of love, faith and trust (with, and in, God)” (SGGS pg. 879).

Basic Tenets & Theology

Sikhism is a monotheistic faith and a revealed religion which shares many similarities with the Semitic traditions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam. However, Sikhism does not believe in the doctrine of Original Sin, nor the concepts of Heaven or Hell. Sikhism preaches that we are rewarded or punished, according to our actions in this lifetime; we reap what we sow. Human life is precious because it is our opportunity to meet God, while living on this earth. Through good actions and by endeavoring

to love humanity, we achieve Self-Realization. God is not a distant reality but resides within us and pervades all of creation. God is both Immanent and Transcendent.

“Some sing your praises thinking you are Transcendent; others praise you thinking you are Immanent”. (SGGS).

Sikhs are distinct from Hindus and Muslims, from all angles, including religious practices, ceremonies, festivals, social customs and traditions.

"Guru Nanak [the Sikh Prophet] recognizes no authority, no doctrine, except that directly revealed to him by God" (SGGS pg. 599).

Since the Gurus wanted to have an enduring impact, and not just a superficial one, it took ten Gurus a period of over 250 years to “condition the soul and spirit” of their followers, to face the tyrant rulers and the barbaric intruders with courage and fortitude. Cowardice and indifference was effectively replaced with courage and bravery. The basic tenets of Sikh Faith are prayer, meditation, honest living, generosity, compassion, sharing, humility and patience. Other important planks on which rests the Sikh Faith are equality of all religions, universal harmony, peace and tolerance. Service to humanity is emphasized.

Hair is a symbol of saintliness, and a reminder of God’s design. It is incumbent for Sikh men and women to retain unshorn hair, and to refrain from adultery, the use of drugs and other intoxicants like alcohol, cocaine, tobacco, opium, marijuana, etc. Lust, too, has been termed an addiction. It is a major religious and spiritual diktat, for a Sikh not to live on alms or donations. Furthermore, a Sikh considers it to be a psychological trauma, and a social stigma, accepting monetary benefits, which one has not worked to earn.

Repudiation of Rituals

In Sikhism, there is no place for idolatry (statue, icons, symbols, or photographs) or human-worship. Ritualism and superficial fanfare related to ceremonies has been denounced. Superstitious beliefs related to so-called specific auspicious days and dates have been negated. The Gurus command that all days have been made by God; therefore, all are equally auspicious. All humanity is created by the Lord; therefore, all are equal. The time when one remembers God is auspicious and the place where one remembers God is sacred. No time or place can be sacred in of itself.

Non-Violence

Sikhs are a peace-loving people. Non-violence, which enforces a strict prohibition against the use of arms under any circumstances, however, has no place in Sikhism. The Sikh Prophet, Guru Gobind Singh, declares, “When all peaceful means fail, to take up the sword is a lawful imperative, to contain the oppressor”. He further states, “I would confront and oppose that what is evil, to destroy it or to subdue it, or die fighting against it, with dignity.”

The fifth and the ninth Gurus were Martyrs. The four teenaged sons of the 10th Guru were Martyrs (the younger ones, aged 7 and 9 were bricked alive while the older ones, aged 15 and 17, performed the supreme sacrifice on the battlefield, facing ruthless seasoned warriors), and they embraced death, as did innumerable of their followers, for upholding the birthright of their choice of practicing the religion of their choice. They preferred death to a life of slavery and subjugation. There is no sign of ‘suffering’ on the faces of the Martyrs; no repentance, no regrets.

The Scripture

The teachings of Sikh Gurus and Saints, in the form of poetic compositions have been compiled in the Sikh Scripture, the Sri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS). This 1430 page volume is reverentially placed on an elevated pedestal in the Gurdwara (Sikh Church). The Holy Book was written, compiled and edited by the Gurus during their lifetimes. It is noteworthy that out of all the scriptures of religions of the world, it is the only scripture written by the same person who received the Revelation.

The Tenth and last Sikh Prophet, Guru Gobind Singh, transferred his authority to the Sikh scripture and to the collectivity of the committed Sikhs, known as the Khalsa. This is the condominium of Guru Granth and Guru Khalsa Panth. The spirit of the Ten Sikh Prophets resides in the mystic body of the Khalsa, while their light resides in the Sikh scripture. The Sarbat Khalsa, an assemblage of representative Sikhs from all over the world, takes major decisions affecting the Sikh nation in consonance with the teachings of the Sikh Gurus enshrined in Guru Granth Sahib. The Sarbat Khalsa has the responsibility to keep the Sikh personal law dynamic and address new issues as they arise.

The tenth Guru, in his wisdom, did not deem it appropriate to include his own autobiography or his poetic encomiums for God in the SGGS like his predecessors had. There is a lot of controversy about the contents of the Dasam Granth, and an overwhelming majority of Sikh Saints, theologians, scholars, and preachers maintain that several ‘additions’ were made to his original works by vested interests, with an ulterior motive of neutralizing the worldview that the Sikhs have a unique and distinct identity, thereby wrongly attempting to present the Sikhs as part of Hinduism.

‘Gurdwara’ (House of Worship)

Gurdwara, which literally means “a door to the Guru,” is the focal point for all Sikh congregations. Guru Nanak, the first Sikh Prophet, established the institution to organize Sikhs on a local level. Since the Sikh doctrine does not allow separation between spiritual and temporal affairs, all political movements affecting Sikhs have been launched from Gurdwaras. Some of the best examples are the Sikh non-violent fight against British aggression in the 1920’s and against Indira Gandhi’s military rule, known as the Emergency, in the 1970’s. Even though the latter affected the entire country, out of a country of almost one billion people, only the Sikhs, who are just two percent of the total population, found courage to oppose tyranny.

There is no ordained priestly class in Sikhism. All Sikhs are expected to read prayers, sing hymns and perform other services. Both women and men can participate in all services and can occupy any administrative positions. As a mark of respect, all devotees must enter the Gurdwara after taking off their footwear and with their heads covered. They bow in front of the Sikh scripture and then sit down to listen to the devotional

hymns. We should remember that the act of genuflection in front of the Sikh scripture is not idol worship. A Sikh bows to the message contained in the scripture and not to a book. Genuflection in front of the Sikh scripture indicates submission to the Word of God. Later, the Congregation stands up in prayer and at the conclusion of the services, partakes of *langar*, which is any type of food prepared with love and devotion by the community.

The tradition of *langar* was started by Guru Nanak, and was institutionalized by Guru Amar Dass, the third Sikh Prophet. All were required to partake of *langar*. Before this policy was put into effect, many Hindu Brahmins would come and meet the Guru, but not eat with the “lower-caste” women and men in the Guru’s congregation. This bold initiative ended the Brahmins’ hypocrisy and confirmed equality between all humanity, as all were forced to eat together. Even the Mughal Emperor Akbar partook of *langar* while sitting on the floor with the common people before he could meet with the Guru. *Langar* inspires and promotes the spirit of disinterested action, *sewa*, in a Sikh and therefore must be cooked by the community and cannot be catered from a restaurant. By catering the food, an artificial distinction between rich and poor is created. Such a distinction repudiates the very purpose of *langar* and is antithetical to Sikhism. The Gurdwara services are performed on all occasions: birth, naming, graduation, commencement of a business-venture, baptism, during weddings, thanksgiving and during sad occasions such as death. The entire Congregation, without distinction of class or creed, enjoys equal status and all are required to sit on the floor to partake of the holy food. No Gurdwara, anywhere in the world (and there are several thousands of them) has been recorded as having been “closed” or “sold.” This is a very unique aspect of the followers of Sikhism, who are famous for sacrificing their all for the welfare of humanity.

Contributions of the 10 Sikh Gurus

As it has been asserted before, the Sikh Scripture declares that the Ten Sikh Gurus were a manifestation of one Divine Light that passed on from one prophet to the next. Even though they changed bodies, the light remained intact and they preached the same message throughout the 250 years of their sojournings on this earth.

Guru Nanak Dev, Sikhism's founder, brought about a revolution in the Eastern world. He opposed tyranny and exploitation. He rebelled against futile practices, empty rituals and superstitions. God sent him as a Prophet to reveal Sikhism to humanity. Guru Nanak was probably the first Human Rights activist known to the Eastern world. The ruling emperor, Babur, imprisoned him when he opposed tyranny of the invader. of Sikhism, as declared by Guru Nanak pronounced three fundamentals; they are: (1) business should be done with integrity, (2) God should be kept in mind throughout all one's endeavors, (3) charity should be extended to the poor. Guru Nanak was exceedingly pluralistic and welcomed all facets of mankind towards and Sikhism and as God's children.

Guru Angad Dev, the second Sikh Prophet, gave definitive shape to a new alphabet, Gurmukhi, that was to replace all existing scripts. The new script was easy to read and the common people, without the use of any intermediaries, could now read and understand Guru Nanak's message. He also strengthened the Sikh congregations and preached God's revelation relentlessly.

Guru Amar Das, the third Sikh Prophet, was a great defender of women's rights. Over thirty percent of the preachers appointed to preach the message of Sikhism were women. He also appointed female bishops. He institutionalized the Sikh tradition of Langar or community kitchen, and enforced equality in all Sikh congregations. He encouraged widows to remarry and banned the horrific practice of sati, where women are forced to be burned with the funeral pyre of their dead husbands.

Guru Ram Das, the fourth Sikh Prophet, founded the spiritual Sikh capital, Amritsar, and started work on the world-famous Golden-Temple, to place emphasis upon the spiritual way of living. His hymns, as recorded in the Sikh scripture, have the breathtaking theme of humility.

Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth Sikh Prophet, was a literary-giant, who undertook the work of compiling the Sikh scripture. He included the hymns of Hindu and Muslim saints without discrimination in the Sikh scripture. He was martyred for refusing to embrace Islam. The extent of barbaric-torture was such that he was boiled in a cauldron containing water, and hot sand was poured upon his head, during scorching summers. Nonetheless, he prayed blissfully.

Guru Hargobind, the sixth Sikh Prophet, was groomed by Guru Arjan to become a warrior-saint. He implemented Guru Nanak's doctrine of double-sovereignty that deems spiritual and temporal affairs of equal importance. A Sikh must strive to excel both spiritually and temporally, always subordinating politics to ethics. The Guru created the Sikh seat of sovereignty, the Akaal Takhat, which is comparable to the Vatican. However, the head of the Akaal Takhat is just a mouthpiece of the Sikh commonwealth, and all of his directives must be a result of decisions taken by the Khalsa Panth, the committed Sikhs all over the world.

Guru Har Rai, the seventh Sikh Prophet, had Guru Hargobind order him to maintain an army to fight oppression and to continue his mission of preaching the word of God. Arms were to be used as a last resort when all peaceful means of reaching a resolution had failed. He pioneered Ayurvedic which is free health care.

Guru Harkrishan, the eighth Sikh Prophet, was appointed Guru when he was barely five years old. He led the masses with grit and determination, displaying rare spiritual-acumen, wisdom and sagacity. He departed from the mortal world at the age of eight, proving that age has no correlation with spiritual power, as prophecy is God's gift, bestowed upon whomsoever God deems worthy. This also is an excellent example of equality, bestowed by the Sikh doctrine, on all human beings.

Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Sikh Prophet is one of the greatest defenders of freedom ever known to humankind. He preached against the Hindu caste system and repudiated the superiority of the Hindu priestly class. When the Brahmins were being proselytized to Islam and came to him for help, he gave them a helping hand, and embraced martyrdom. Long before Voltaire was to say, "I might not believe in what you say but I will fight till death for your right to say it," the Guru showed the world that freedom of practice was a cherished gift that ought to be defended. The Guru was a great warrior, but he gave his life peacefully.

Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and the last Sikh Prophet, gave up everything in his fight against oppression. He sacrificed his four sons, his parents and gave his own life while preaching the message of love. "Hear ye all, I proclaim the truth, only those who love will find God". The Guru was a prolific writer, a poet, a great warrior, a musician, a chef, and had

innumerable other talents. His greatest accomplishment was his non-attachment to this world and his ordination committed Sikh, the Khalsa.

The Vaisaakhi of 1699 : Beginning of a Revolutionary Era

The manner in which Guru Gobind Singh gave proof of his thorough knowledge of the art of dramaturgy on the Baisakhi day is fairly well known. He asked for a 'head,' when a brave individual offered his head. This man was taken into the Guru's tent, and when the Guru returned with a blood-soaked sword, he asked for another head. The audience was stunned, but when he asked for another and then another, individuals volunteered. He repeated the call a total four times more. Finally, he brought out the five men, and still alive, to the amazement of those onlookers. The five were then administered what is known as the Baptism of the Double-edged Sword (khande di pahul), and were then knighted as Singhs, the Five Beloved Ones; they were the original constituents of the Order of the Khalsa, into which the Guru himself begged to be admitted, and was initiated as the sixth. On that day, a milestone in Sikh history, Guru Gobind Singh transformed Sikhism by giving it its modern form. The most prominent element that this Guru initiated was the five articles of faith. They prescribe that Sikhs wear: (1) unshorn hair, (2) a small wooden comb for the hair, (3) a steel bracelet; its symbolism is in the fact that it is round pointing to the fact that reality is without a start and without a finish, (4) a ceremonial sword pointing to Sikh's dedication to strive for fairness and truth, and (5) knee-length under-shorts attempting to uphold the value of a disciplined life-style so dear to a Sikh's heart. Guru Gobind Singh proclaimed a formal code of conduct that forbids adultery and promiscuous sexual behavior, use of drugs and intoxicants, cutting of hair from any part of one's body, female infanticide and consumption of sacrificial meat. Hair, being sacred, was to be kept covered at all times. This required the wearing of turbans and scarves, which are also signs of sovereignty.

Ceremonies & Festivals

The religion of Sikhism notes four momentous episodes in one's life: birth, initiation, marriage, and death. The importance of birth and death in an individual's existence are clear. "Amrit", the Initiation ceremony, marks the commencement of 'the journey' symbolizing the aspirant's first step as per the Sikh 'way of life'. Those who have taken Amrit are called the Khalsa. 'Anand Karaj', or marriage, is another significant ceremony. It is a public commitment by two Sikhs to walk on the path of Guru Nanak throughout their lives. The marriage ceremony becomes a spiritual journey undertaken by two lovers of righteousness, striving to achieve Self-Realization.

All other ceremonies, whether child naming, graduation, starting a business-venture or employment are, inevitably, marked by a gathering of relatives and friends at a Gurdwara. Holy hymns are recited and Langar is served to the guests.

The major festivals of the Sikhs are "Hola Mohalla," which is celebrated in March, to observe the change of season by indulging in sports and revelry and "Baisakhi". "Diwali", in November, is celebrated to mark the occasion when the sixth Guru secured the release of 52 kings from the prison of India's Mughal Emperor, Jehangir.

A Brief Sketch of Sikh History

In 1710, a republic was established under Baba Banda Singh Bahadur in the Moghul Empire found in present day India. At that time, the farming areas were handed over to farmers and then he announced throughout the land that everyone is part and parcel of the state; everyone is equal. Subsequently, he proclaimed that power was not something held over a people, but something that emanates from the people, and hence, was the possession of the people.

For fifty years, through heartless and appalling maltreatment with the sole intent of a mass genocide, not only did the Sikhs turn down the cruelty of the oppressive Muslim regime, but refused to abandon their cry: "We want liberty or death!" As the battles came to a close, their freedom and liberty was reinstated. Sikh's took control of the government and the Sikh Commonwealth was established from the middle of the 18th century for

about 100 years. This eventually developed into the Sikh Empire, called SarkariKhalsa,

For this extended period of time, the Sikh Empire continued all the way from the middle of India to Afghanistan and spreading east as far as Tibet. Unfortunately, the British army assailed the Sikh Empire towards the middle of the 19th century in the Anglo-Sikh wars. To the Sikhs credit, as one historian notes, they “brought the British and their Hindu mercenaries to their knees every time.” In pre-British India, the powerful Sikh Emperor, Maharajah Ranjit Singh, is renowned for having sanctioned grants of cash, gold, and land for Hindu Temples, Christian Churches, and Muslim Mosques. He had, under his employ, European courtiers and generals, besides people from all religions and races in India

Before India gained its independence in 1947, many Sikhs took part in the fight for independence. Their active cooperation was enlisted by the Congress Party, which was spearheading the movement under the stewardship of Mahatma Gandhi. At this juncture, promises pertaining to Sikh identity, representation and autonomy, were made by the Congress Party. The Sikhs believed these promises, and plunged head-on into the arena. From the over two thousand killed in the fight for Indian independence, over fifteen hundred of them were Sikhs: an astonishing number when we take into consideration what percentage of Indian are Sikhs! Similarly, from the more than 2500 prisoners sentenced to life, over 2000 of them were Sikhs. Also, from the more than one hundred-twenty Indians executed through hanging at the hands of the British, again over eighty percent of them were Sikhs. In fact, historians and British archives have noted that Sikhs heroically chose death over apologizing and having their lives spared for their insurrections in India.

Ever-since independence in 1947, there has been well-thought out indirect attacks at the Sikh sub-culture attempting to cause the Sikh religion, its values and political influence to dissolve. Even other minorities (Christians and Muslims) in India have been subjected to maltreatment at the hands of the majority. Even though the writers of the Constitution pledged to write it with the consent and approval of the Sikh minority, this promise was not kept three years later. There was not any mention of Sikh autonomy within the framework of the Constitution. As a consequence, even though Sikhs played an integral role in freeing India, the promise of Sikhs’ rights to sovereignty and autonomy was quickly forgotten. A

constitution was framed paving the way for a decidedly centralized government run by the majority of Indians, completely denying any Sikh religious identity or political sovereignty.

Continued frustration due to unfulfilled promises made by the Indian government starting in 1947, led the Sikhs to start a peaceful movement, resulting in several thousand Sikh locked up in Indian jails over the span of a quarter of a century. To crush the non-violent independence movement, the government deployed ruthless tactics. In retaliation to the injustice meted out, this agitation assumed the form of a Sikh independence movement with the desire of breaking away from the Union of India. In 1984, an army operation was launched on the Golden Temple and 37 other Sikh shrines, killing several thousand Sikhs. Over 200,000 innocent Sikhs were killed in the aftermath of this operation, and thousands are still languishing in jails, without trial. The paradox of this injustice is that even two decades later, thousands of Sikh widows still pine for justice, whilst the murderers were given Ministerial berths. The Indian State has subdued all attempts by Amnesty International and local human rights groups like the People's Commission.

Unitarian Universalism

SYMBOL OF UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM



The Flaming Chalice

The Flaming Chalice symbolizes a continuous quest for freedom of belief, individual conscience and justice making.

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST PRAYER

Spirit of Life, by the Rev. Beth Graham

Spirit of Life,

Come unto me.

Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.

Blow in the wind,

Rise in the sea,

Move in the hand,

Giving life the shape of justice.

Roots hold me close,

Wings set me free,

Spirit of Life,

Come to me, come to me

Unitarian Universalist

Medford, MA



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISTS

at a glance

The religions associated with Unitarian Universalism are liberal groups who take traditions from both Christian and Jewish sources. Practitioners take a post modern slant on religious issues allowing them to freely evaluate the important religious questions of history,

The most basic belief of this religious group is that existential reality is the most important aspect of reality that one must take into consideration to make good religious decisions. Accordingly, one cannot simply look towards a book, a rabbi, a pope, an imam for true religious conclusions, but, instead, must look inward for true enlightenment. Accordingly, the search for truth should be unhampered by religious dogma or cries of heresy. UUs have no official creeds or dogma.

Like most relativists, they believe in no objective religious truth; like the world around us, religion is ever-changing. No human understanding could ever be the final word on an issue. Every prophet, saint, or sage of every era has something new to say and add to the society at large,

Probably the most important thing for a UU is morality. Only one that lives an ethical life could really be said to be acting religiously. All relationships – between relatives, friends, spouses, races, nations – should be guided by a spirit of equality, fairness and justice.

Beliefs, Creeds and Doctrines

“And hear our heretical views, Come return to your place in the pews,
You were not born in sin, So lift up your chin,
You have only your dogmas to lose.”

~ Leonard Mason, UU Minister

Unitarian Universalists believe in the following:

- Each person should push for his/her own existential viewpoint.
- Each person has the ability to reason.
- Institutions and religious organizations are an unnecessary evil.
- Religious freedom without fear of recompense, upbraiding or censure.
- Tolerance
- Relativism
- The search for truth is unending.
- No person has a greater claim to freedom than another.
- Democracy
- No notion is free from one who desire to criticize it.
- Ethics is the result of religion.

While they lack any official creed, the statutes of the UUA (Unitarian Universalist Association) and its associated societies and churches do, in fact, claim that they have one unifying principle. In short, they all support one another in their efforts to maintain their pluralistic beliefs.

Belief in God

Obviously, as their ranks include both theists and atheists, UUs lack any definitive notion God. While most members of UU disbelieve in the supernatural, there is not much room for an all-knowing powerful god. However, many accept the spirit of life common to all living beings; some even choose to define this as God.

In their services, one will usually not find UUs saying anything about God or Higher powers. Instead, they focus on more practical issues like human being's psychological well-being, practical concerns and normative ethics.

While they do not officially reject other religion's holy books, they relegate their value to one of many. For example, the Bible is just one of the countless significant religious writings throughout the history of mankind, even though it would be an absurdity, to them, for one to interpret it, overall, literally.

Jesus' Role in the Unitarian Universalist Church

As UUs reject the literal truth of the Bible, they reject Mary's immaculate conception, the supernatural stories of Jesus' life, as well as his resurrection. He is just one of the many ethical agents of history to UUs.

Few, if any UUs maintain that there is life after death. Instead one achieves immortality through living and good and ethical life which has countless effects on the world we live in now and the world that will be in the future.

Role of Women and Family

UUs believe egalitarianism should be pursued in all areas of life.

Commonalities and Differences

The religious practices referenced are of general acceptance and may vary from sect to sect and individual observance.

Founder:

Bahai' – Baha'u'llah
Buddhism – Prince Gautama Siddhartha
Christianity – Jesus Christ
Hindu - None
Islam – Muhammed
Jainism - Tirthankar
Judaism – Abraham
Native American - None
Sikhism – Guru Nanak
Unitarian Universalist - None

Creation of Universe:

Bahai' – by God
Buddhism – Creation occurs repeatedly over time
Christianity – by God in six days (Genesis)
Hinduism – formed from the breath of Vishnu
Islam – created by God
Jainism – no creator, “uncreated and indestructible”
Judaism – by God, six days (Genesis)
Native American – belief varies from tribe to tribe
Sikhism – created from void by God in one stroke
Unitarian Universalist – Big Bang Theory

Holy Scriptures:

Bahai' - Kita'b-I-Aqdas
Buddhism – The Tripetka
Christianity – The Old/New Testament
Hinduism – Vedas/ Bhagavada Gita
Islam – The Qur'an
Jainism – Agam Sutras
Judaism – The Old Testament
Native American – Lore shared verbally by tribal elders
Sikhism – Sri Guru Granth Sahib (written by prophets themselves)
Unitarian Universalist - None

Baptism-Initiation Ceremonies:

Bahai' - None
Buddhism - None
Christianity – Baptism, Communion, Confirmation
Hinduism – Sacred Thread
Islam – Rasm-I-Bismillah
Jainism – Lipi Sankyan Sanskar
Judaism – Bar/Bat Mitzvah
Native American – Vision Quest
Sikhism – Amrit-paan

Afterlife – Resurrection:

Bahai' – soul everlasting
Buddhism – reincarnation
Christianity – Heaven
Hinduism – reincarnation based upon karma
Islam – Garden of Eternity or Hell
Jainism – continuous cycle
Judaism – belief in Heaven
Native American – merge with Great Spirit
Sikhism – reincarnation or soul merges with God
Unitarian Universalist – none

Idol Worship:

Bahai' - no
Buddhism - no
Christianity – condemned
Hinduism – permissible
Islam - condemned
Jainism - permissible
Judaism – condemned
Native American - permissible
Sikhism – condemned
Unitarian Universalist - no

Spiritual Leader of Holy Congregation:

Bahai' – Spiritual Assembly
Buddhism - Abbot
Christianity – Priest/Minister/Pastor
Hinduism – Guru
Islam - Imam
Jainism - Gurudev
Judaism – Rabbi
Native American – Shaman
Sikhism – Sri Guru Granth Sahib
Unitarian Universalist – Minister

Birth of God in Human Form:

Bahai' - no
Buddhism - no
Christianity – Jesus Christ
Hinduism – various entities
Islam – no
Jainism - no
Judaism – no
Native American – no
Sikhism – no
Unitarian Universalist - no

Fasting & Repentance:

Bahai' – yes, March 2-21
Buddhism - yes
Christianity – yes, Lent
Hinduism - yes
Islam – yes, Ramadan
Jainism - yes
Judaism – yes, Yom Kippur, four minor fasts
Native Americans – yes
Sikhism – no
Unitarian Universalist - no

Prayer:

Bahai' – in direction of Bahji, burial place of Baha'u'llah, near Israel, must choose 1 of 3 obligatory prayers daily
Buddhism – meditation
Christianity – individual, anytime, or congregational mass
Hinduism – anytime
Islam – 5 times a day, on a mat, facing East
Jainism – anytime
Judaism – 3 times daily facing Jerusalem
Native American – anytime
Sikhism – anytime
Unitarian Universalist - meditation

Equality of Men & Women:

Bahai' – yes
Buddhism – yes
Christianity – no
Hinduism - no
Islam - no
Jainism - no
Judaism - no
Native Americans - yes
Sikhism - yes
Unitarian Universalists – yes

Disposal of Human Remains:

Bahai' - burial
Buddhism – cremation
Christianity – burial
Hinduism – immersion in rivers near shrines
Islam – burial
Jainism - cremation
Judaism – burial, cremation forbidden
Native American – varies from tribe to tribe
Sikhism – any method
Unitarian Universalist – any method

Restrictions Regarding Animals:

Bahai' - none
Buddhism - none
Christianity - none
Hinduism – Cows are sacred
Islam – “Vicious beasts” should be killed.
Jainism - none
Judaism – none
Native American – Eagles, horses and bears are considered sacred
Sikhism – all life considered precious
Unitarian Universalist - none

Dietary Restrictions:

Bahai' - none
Buddhism - none
Christianity - none
Hinduism – vegetarian, no alcohol
Islam – pork, carnivorous animals and alcohol are forbidden
Jainism – vegetarian, no alcohol
Judaism – no shellfish, pork, bugs, certain animals and bird
Native American – respect for food as it contains “life and consciousness”
Sikhism – no alcohol or tobacco
Unitarian Universalist - none

Clothing Restrictions:

Bahai' - none
Buddhism - none
Christianity – clergy only
Hinduism – priests, white or saffron robes
Islam – Wearing of silk prohibited, women must cover everything but their eyes with *burqa*
Jainism – monks, *dhoti* (loin cloth) and shawl
Judaism – head covering
Native American – ceremonial dress for special occasions
Sikhism – the 5 Ks
Unitarian Universalist - none

Ascetism & Celibacy:

Bahai' – no
Buddhism - no
Christianity – yes
Hinduism – no
Islam - no
Jainism – yes
Judaism – no
Native American – no
Sikhism – no
Unitarian Universalist - no

Tolerance of Other Religions:

Bahai' - no
Buddhism – yes
Christianity - no
Hinduism – yes
Islam - no
Jainism - yes
Judaism - yes
Native American - yes
Sikhism - yes
Unitarian Universalist - yes

Poetry, Singing, Dancing:

Bahai' – permissible
Buddhism – permissible
Christianity – permissible
Hinduism – permissible
Islam – prohibited, photos also prohibited
Jainism – permissible
Judaism – permissible, except on High Holy days
Native American – permissible
Sikhism – singing & poetry permitted, dancing prohibited in Gurdwaras
Unitarian Universalist – permissible

Auspicious/Holy Days:

Bahai' – yes
Buddhism – yes
Christianity – yes
Hinduism – yes
Islam – yes
Jainism – yes
Judaism – yes
Native American – yes
Sikhism – all days considered the same
Unitarian Universalist - no

Fear/Love Based:

Bahai' – Love
Buddhism – Love
Christianity – Fear
Hinduism – Love
Islam – Fear
Jainism – Fear
Judaism – Fear
Native American – Love
Sikhism – Love
Unitarian Universalist – Love

Salvation:

Bahai' – through God
Buddhism – Mahayana
Christianity – through Jesus Christ
Hinduism – through God
Islam – through God
Jainism - yes
Judaism – through following the commandments
Native American - no
Sikhism – through God's grace
Unitarian Universalist - none

Actively Seeks Converts:

Bahai' – yes
Buddhism - no
Christianity – yes
Hinduism - no
Islam – yes
Jainism – no
Judaism – no
Native American – no
Sikhism – no
Unitarian Universalist - no

Performance of Rituals:

Bahai' – yes
Buddhism - no
Christianity - yes
Hinduism - yes
Islam - yes
Jainism - yes
Judaism - yes
Native American – yes
Sikhism – no
Unitarian Universalist - no

Marriage Outside of Faith:

Bahai' - no
Buddhism - no
Christianity – person outside of faith must convert
Hindu - no
Islam – Permitted for males, never for females
Jainism - no
Judaism – no
Native American – permitted but not encouraged
Sikhism – either gender can marry outside of faith if that party agrees to convert to Sikhism
Unitarian Universalist – permitted

Multiple Wives:

Bahai' – no
Buddhism – no
Christianity – no
Hinduism – no
Islam – yes
Jainism – no
Judaism – no
Native American – permissible in some tribes, each wife must be provided with her own dwelling
Sikhism – no
Unitarian Universalist – no

Financial Matters

Islam – Males inherit 2/3, woman 1/3
Interest on investments is forbidden
Judaism – first son gets double inheritance
Other faiths are either silent or support equitable financial distribution

Divorce:

Bahai' – permitted, but discouraged
Buddhism - silent
Christianity – May not remarry in the faith unless marriage annulled
Hinduism – permitted, but not by “virtuous” people
Islam – readily permissible for men
Jainism - forbidden
Judaism – permissible
Native American – varies from tribe to tribe
Sikhism – discouraged
Unitarian Universalist - permitted

Adultery:

Bahai' – forbidden
Buddhism – forbidden
Christianity – forbidden
Hinduism – forbidden
Islam – permitted with women captured in war
Jainism – forbidden
Judaism – forbidden
Native American – permitted in some tribes
Sikhism – forbidden
Unitarian Universalist – not encouraged

Belief in Heaven and Hell:

Bahai' - state of soul, not in physical sense
Buddhism - no
Christianity – yes
Hinduism – no
Islam – yes
Jainism – yes
Judaism – yes
Native American – no
Sikhism – no
Unitarian Universalist – no

Believe God is Partisan:

Christianity – yes

Hinduism – no

Islam – yes

Jainism – yes

Judaism – yes

Sikhism – no

Believe God is Jealous:

Christianity – yes

Hinduism – no

Islam – yes

Jainism – yes

Judaism – yes

Sikhism–no

Notes

Notes

